THE BITE OF BENIN

ROBERT SIMPSON

The Bite of Benin

"WHERE MANY GO IN
BUT FEW COME OUT."

BY

ROBERT SIMPSON

AUTHOR OF
SWAMP BREATH, ETC.

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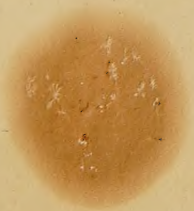
To My Mother



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THE BITE OF BENIN

CHAPTER I

THE CHIEF OF AKERRI

WITHIN a bare room of a mud-walled hut in the village of Akerri two men leaned across a rickety table and talked in whispers. A kerosene lamp with a colored glass reservoir shed its flickering light upon their faces—one of which was white, young, eager; the other black, middle-aged, impassive.

Cards and a dice box occupied the space between them.

The white man—he was little more than a boy—sat upon an ancient camp chair that tilted sidewise and threatened to collapse—the black upon an empty two-tin kerosene case.

Beyond them, in the shadows of the doorway, a lithe young Jackrie girl lay coiled upon a mat—watching.

Upon the wall, immediately above the white man's head, hung a cheap print of Queen Victoria. Cralla was a devout patriot.

The village sweltered in heathenish slumber. Out of the swamps and the bush round about came the shrill whistling of insects and the strange, burring croak of frogs. Occasionally the yelp of a marauding bush dog, kicked out of a neighboring hut, or the singsong crooning of a dusky mother to a wakeful infant, would disturb the somber quiet, but neither

the white man nor the black nor the girl in the doorway paid any heed.

The white man's name was Ralph Debenham. He was a young Englishman, within striking distance of his majority, and he had been in the Niger Delta about a year, being employed as an assistant on Marsden & Co.'s trading station at Segwanga. This was two hour's distant from Akerri by canoe.

In Segwanga young Debenham was known as a "queer cuss," which decided his status finally and allowed him to go his own queer way unhindered and unquestioned.

If a "first-timer" did not volunteer information about himself it was not considered judicious to inquire into his reason for having severed his connections with the homeland to take up temporary residence in a country in which death comes in so many guises that there are no names for some of them.

But in passing it may be said that visiting native villages alone, after dark, was once, and probably is yet, a frequent cause for sudden, violent additions to the death rate.

A glimpse of Debenham's quick, dark eyes and eager, twitching mouth, would have told a physiognomist in a twinkling that he was impulsive to the point of suicidal recklessness. The fact of his being in the native village of Akerri after midnight was sufficient proof of his dominant characteristics without searching his face to find them.

His companion was Chief Cralla, a magnificently built, broad-faced Jackrie, whose color and lips and nose told of an ancient Portuguese strain in his blood.

Cralla was remarkable in many respects.

First, he was almost a gentleman—and the ordinary Jackrie is not within several centuries of that distinction. His habitat is the Benin River district of

that mystic, swampy maze known as the Niger Delta, and he is a liar and a thief by birth and education!

He buys his wives like cattle and does not eat with a knife and fork, but sits upon his haunches about the family chop-pot; and he who has the largest and most prehensile hands gets the biggest share.

In his squalid, mud-built villages, screened from the outer world by the thick, green curtain of the Delta bush, some of his brethren wear clothes and some do not. Like olives, clothes are an acquired taste among them.

His gods are strange and his customs queer and often terrible. He has no word in the mongrel jargon he speaks that expresses gratitude.

But Chief Cralla was different. In addition to the cloth of brilliant "real India" which was girded about him, native fashion, like a skirt, leaving several yards to trail splendidly in his wake, he wore a singlet of the finest quality, a soft white silk shirt and a coat of spotless white flannel. He was admitted to be the leader of fashion.

Shoes, however, were as yet too much for him. Feet that have gone naked and unrestrained from infancy to manhood do not take kindly to the confinement of leather.

Cralla's hair was a crinkly gray—a fact that gave him added dignity. His lips, though puffy, were unusually thin, and his nose had come down to him from a European ancestor.

It was not his fault that his parents had marred an otherwise good face by marking it with the family coat-of-arms, which consisted of queer looking little puttylike lumps—black, of course—arranged in regular order on his forehead and cheeks, and induced during adolescence by the simple, if painful, process of marking out the design with a sharp knife and

doctoring the wounds with a root juice that caused those permanent swellings.

His eyes, black as the night without, watched Debenham with a lazy interest that was most disconcerting.

The girl in the doorway, who was called Ilora, watched them both.

Debenham was speaking, and his voice sounded like the low hum of bees.

"You savvy where he be? You can go to his place any time? No be so?"

Cralla nodded, but hesitatingly; as though he were afraid to admit it, and his glance drifted to the cards. He had an abnormal passion for gambling, and would bet on anything, from the number of palm-nut kernels in a bushel to a race between a crocodile and the first slave victim of a new moon *ju-ju,* across the dark, sacrificial pool beyond Saganna.

And he had been known to back the slave—and win!

"Wait li'l bit," Debenham urged in a low monotone. "We play when we finish talk. This is a big palaver—big money palaver. Niger Company at Burutu say they go pay them man who can catch Clavering—fifty thousand piece. *Fifty thousand,* Cralla! Think of it!"

"Ee-yaw!"

The Jackrie's exclamation, which is the equivalent of "Holy smoke!" or anything you are in the habit of saying when you are surprised and awed, proved that he thought fifty thousand pieces a considerable fortune.

In civilized currency it meant five thousand pounds. Two shillings was the equivalent of a "piece," and was so called because the amount purchased an eight-yard piece of print-cloth—the grade generally worn by the "masses."

Only within the past few days had the Niger Company raised its standing offer of one thousand pounds to five thousand pounds for the capture of Graydon Clavering, alive or dead—preferably dead!

The man was worthy of the price.

Often aptly referred to as the "human harmattan," Clavering was an enigma.

No one really knew who he was or where he had come from, but many men, in thoughtless anger, had blasphemed against the mother who had borne him.

The Niger Company did not care to enumerate the charges against him. He was called wonderful, terrible, unscrupulous, magnificent, daring, spectacular and—devilish; and probably the final adjective was the best.

He went everywhere and did anything he pleased; knew every bush-path that led into the heart of the mysterious hinterland, and could steer a launch blindfolded through the intricate network of the dark, forbidding Delta creeks.

He had smuggled arms and ammunition, and sold them to the natives, which means much indiscriminate killing of both black and white. He had made and unmade chiefs; incited rebellions and quelled them; put down one *juju* and set up another.

He had stolen the government's launch *Vigilant,* and returned it several weeks later plus a new coat of black paint and a significant skull-and-cross-bones design on the funnel. He had taken fifty puncheons of palm oil out of Carey & Co.'s oil yard, and had sold them two days later in ten-puncheon lots to the five trading firms on the Segwanga Creek.

He appeared to command legions of natives, but was never seen in the company of any of them. He had no headquarters—lived nowhere; appeared, de-

spoiled, vanished and appeared again in the most unexpected places.

The natives considered him a *juju,* and feared him as they feared the most ancient of their fetish superstitions; the whites regarded him in much the same way as they did a harmattan mist, which comes like a gray ghost in the night, chilling the tropical atmosphere to freezing point, and, taking its toll of lives, passes on into nothingness again.

"Harmattan" Clavering's latest exploit had been to set the Kwalis, a dangerous, up-river tribe, to work upon a systematic interference with the Niger Company's business. As a result the company's concessions in Kwali territory had been put out of operation and their white occupants forced to flee for their lives.

Kwali country just then, so far as the white trading element was concerned, was effectively sealed—a fact that was costing the Niger Company several times the price of Clavering's head, and netting Clavering a like amount in his monopoly of the territory's mahogany and produce.

These conditions might continue for a month or two till the rebellious natives were brought to order; and then Clavering, with his pockets well lined with upper Delta gold, would drift from the scene and appear again in a locality no one would have suspected.

Doubtless in the public mind Clavering and his deeds and powers were greatly exaggerated. There were a hundred versions to every story told about him.

But there is only one version to this one.

"Fifty thousand piece, Cralla!" Debenham repeated. "I can shoot"—he snapped his fingers—"like that, and it's all over. Fifty thousand, Cralla, don't forget that! Fifty thousand!"

The girl in the doorway rolled over and curled her

head in her arms as though the discussion made her very tired. It was not the first time Debenham had broached the subject.

Cralla glanced quickly in her direction, hesitated a second, then leaned nearer to his guest.

"I no savvy fif' t'ousan'. How much puncheon be fif' t'ousan'?"

Debenham calculated quickly, figuring the puncheon of palm oil as one hundred and eighty gallons at the prevailing purchase price. Then, with a note of awe in his voice, he said slowly and impressively:

"Sev-en hun-dred!"

"Ee-yaw! Chaw!" The final exclamation trailed out into a whispering silence.

Cralla sat up straight, regarding his guest with an expression of unbelief, as though he doubted that there were as many as seven hundred puncheons of palm oil in the whole world.

"You no trouble for nothing," Debenham whispered temptingly. "Tell me where I can find him, and I go get him myself. I no fear them man. When I catch him and bring him to Niger Company beach they'll pay me seven hundred puncheon, then I pay you half—savvy? You'll be big man then—bigger than Awalla!"

Awalla was the richest and most influential chief in the district, and Cralla, muttering something in Jackrie, appeared to be studying the matter; perhaps picturing himself taking precedence to Awalla. In any case, his eagerness increased, as though he would tell what he knew at once.

But as Debenham watched and waited there came into the Jackrie's face the expression the adventurous young Englishman had dreaded—that superstitious fear which Harmattan Clavering had generated in the breast of every native who had heard his name.

"I no fit." Cralla backed away from the proposal

physically as well as mentally. "Clavering be *ju-ju*. If I talk a hundred man come kill me one time. Plen'y puncheon no use for dead man!"

From a neighboring slave compound came the eery whining of a newly-branded human purchase, awakened from a troubled sleep. Debenham tried to conceal his disgust, but did not succeed very well.

Ilora's head rose a little and her eyes fell upon Debenham with a lazy indifference that was the height of supreme contempt. Then, resting her cheek upon her arms again, she seemed to doze as he droned on persuasively.

"You can, Cralla. That *ju-ju* talk is fool talk. Those things"—he nodded toward the cards and dice—"be bigger *ju-ju* than Clavering."

Cralla's expression instantly changed from fear to fascination. His hand went out to the dice box like a coy lover's to his sweetheart's hand.

"Tell you what I'll do, Cralla," Debenham said suddenly. "I'll play you for it."

"Chaw!"

Cralla's eyes snapped upon his tempter in amazement. His exclamation meant that he thought Debenham was taking an unfair advantage of him.

Ilora raised her head again, and this time did not let it fall. The whining in the slave compound had ceased.

Debenham concealed a smile of triumph, and paused impressively to allow Cralla's greatest weakness to feed upon his idea. Then he leaned across the table.

"I'll play you for it. If I lose, I pay five puncheon. If you lose, you tell which place I can find him. One throw. You play?"

The Jackrie stirred uneasily, looked all about him, fought a useless fight for a minute or two—and lost.

Ilora raised herself upon her elbows.

"Be five puncheon you pay?" Cralla asked hoarsely.

"Five puncheon!" Debenham returned with remarkable coolness in one so young, considering the fact that he was gambling with six months' pay. "And you tell if you lose?"

Cralla took up the dice box in a shaking hand that distinctly said that he was gambling with death. Young Debenham knew that, too, but he needed the five thousand pounds very badly. At least, others for whom he was responsible did, and to him that meant the same thing.

He had no fear of Cralla not paying if he lost. Cralla always paid; probably because he knew that if he did not others would not pay him when he won.

And Cralla usually won.

Ilora crept up to her knees.

"One throw," Debenham said, struggling to keep the anxiety he felt out of his voice. "You first."

Cralla hesitated, smiled a ghastly smile, looked affrightedly about him again. Then, with a significant shrug of the shoulders, he rattled the dice box vigorously, muttered some jargon in Jackrie, and threw.

His nose followed the dice to the table, then came up slowly.

He grinned. He had thrown two fives.

Debenham went a little whiter.

Ilora had risen to her feet—a lithe black Venus, coiled about by a rich cloth of deep red. There was a yellow silk handkerchief wound about her head. Her glistening white teeth gleamed exultantly in answer to Cralla's smile, and as Debenham took up the dice box she went still nearer to the table with a soundless movement that brought her more swiftly than one realized up behind the young Englishman.

He threw.

Cralla saw the result first, and jerked backward upon

the kerosene case as though Debenham had struck him. A harsh Jackrie guttural escaped him.

Debenham had thrown eleven.

Ilora's hands crept up to the silk handkerchief about her head, and she glided nearer to Debenham, who was watching Cralla's twitching lips with a satisfied smile.

There was an awesome silence.

And then, in a second, something glaring yellow whipped across Debenham's eyes and tightened.

"Hell! You black swine, you've—"

It ended in a choking gurgle as a hand was clapped over his mouth. The light of the little lamp went out, throwing the hut into the darkness of the Pit.

There was a scuffling of feet, the labored hiss of Debenham's struggles to avoid a gag, a murmuring storm of Jackrie, the sudden winding of a rope round Debenham's ankles—and then—

"Thanks, everybody. I think that will do. Lift them up and carry them out. Don't hurt the white man, but you can pound friend Cralla for all you are worth. Good girl, Ilora. Cleverly done. *Wah!*"

Clavering!

CHAPTER II

MISS SEVEROID

THERE is nothing between Forcados and Segwanga save gloomily threatening creeks and a monotonous bank of drab green bush that suggests a great deal of mystery and cloaks much that is weird and incomprehensible.

Forcados, the bleak and enervating terminal for steamers out of Liverpool, was four hours from Segwanga by a good launch.

But the mission's launch *Violet* was not a good launch, and when something happened to her boiler twenty miles north of Forcados at eight in the evening, which is two hours after dark, the young man from Marsden's Beach broke the news to the Mission Lady as gently as he could.

They were the only passengers.

The Mission Lady laughed to show that she did not care, and they sat together, stranded in the midst of nowhere, surrounded by a blanket of darkness in which the little cabin lamp seemed like a beacon—that is, when it was not almost smothered by the hosts of insects that crowded about it. Davie Tait—that was the young man's name—really did not mind the delay at all. He had been down to Forcados superintending the transfer of a shipment of kerosene from an American oil ship to a dirty little low-draft river boat, and the Mission Lady was so much of a change after so

onerous a task that he actually hoped the dusky engineer would be in no hurry making his repairs.

The Mission Lady had just come out from England, and Davie, every time he looked at her, wondered why on earth she had come out at all.

To begin with, the Delta was no place for a white woman for several unsavory reasons, and the new Mission Lady breathed soft, soothing femininity from the top of her dull gold head to the soles of her small white buckskin shoes.

As a rule, mission ladies were thin, worn, disappointed-looking women who did not seem to care much whether they lived or died. But the new Mission Lady was not in the least like that.

Her hair, glinting out of the shadows of the broad rim of her pith helmet tempted Davie, who was young and impressionable, to remove the helmet and disclose all of the treasure beneath. Then he saw her eyes—large, blue and deep with the innocence of a child in them. He felt himself slipping into a sort of trance, in which he rudely dissected the Mission Lady's strong, womanly face, feature by feature, vaguely conscious that she was asking a great many questions of the same sort *he* had asked when he first arrived in the country, and that he was answering them as intelligibly as he could.

He saw that her eyebrows were very dark and her lashes darker and very long. Her nose was small and straight, and her mouth, sensitive and delicious to look upon, seemed destined to kiss away children's tears.

But the chin gave the impression that all the softness and the warmth in her face was built upon a solid foundation, and one knew instantly that once those firm little jaws came together, there was a wealth of strength and will to keep them shut.

She was not tall, nor short, nor stout, nor yet too

slender; but all soft lines and warmth and sympathy, which Davie felt would go to waste upon greasy, half-naked black brutes who would not even begin to appreciate it. Her voice was low and evenly modulated, and she said her name was Miss Severoid.

When Davie told her that he was employed by Marsden & Co. at Segwanga, she started perceptibly and seemed to come nearer to him, mentally and physically. In fact, though he could not have explained why, he was a little afraid of her after that. Her eyes glowed upon him so steadily.

"Do you think he will be long?" she inquired, breaking a somewhat awkward pause and referring to the engineer's efforts to repair the boiler.

"Not very."

Davie knew that he lied, but he was afraid to tell her that the repairs would consume two or three hours.

"I don't care for myself," the Mission Lady admitted bravely, fanning herself to keep the mosquitoes and sandflies away, "but I'm afraid the people at the mission will be worried."

"Shall I go out and see how he is getting along?"

"N-no, please. Just—that is—I—"

"All right."

Both smiled, and Davie saw that Miss Severoid's teeth were small and white and even. He also observed that there was hardly an inch of seat separating him from her, and he had no idea of how she had come so near. He fidgeted, twirling his helmet about in his hands; and then, using it as a fan, scattered the swarm of insects about the lamp, which, of course, made him move a foot or two away from his companion.

The Mission Lady's eyes followed him, and he knew that they did, though he did not look at her. Just as he was trying to say something to relieve the depress-

ing quiet, she rose and walked slowly past him to the door of the cabin, where she stood very still, staring out into the pitch black night.

Davie was sure he had offended her, particularly when he saw her hands clench and unclench slowly, her long tapering fingers giving the impression of seizing upon something and crushing it. He wished he could say he was sorry or something, but words of apology were difficult. And then she turned and came toward him again. Her cheeks were a little paler than they had been.

"How long have you been in Segwanga, Mr. Tait?" she asked, resuming her seat with leisurely indifference.

"Oh, only seven months. Just a month before poor Debenham disappeared."

"Disappeared!"

The word was repeated eagerly, as though it anticipated a story. Davie, being anxious to talk and to please, obliged readily.

"Yes—just like smoke from a pipe. He was a queer skate, always digging around native villages after dinner and going off on a ran-dan all by himself. But he did it once too often. Went out one night, nobody knew where (nobody ever did know where he went to) and that night he didn't come back. We looked for him, of course—everybody did; but there wasn't a chance in a million that we'd find him when he didn't show up on his own feet. And he didn't.

"Chief Cralla of Akerri was quite a pal of poor Deb's, and we knew he went there very often. But Cralla claims he wasn't at Akerri that night, and of course everybody in his filthy town agrees with him. You can't get a Jackrie to give evidence against a Jackrie, especially in a case like that.

"McClure—he's my boss, Marsden's agent at Segwanga—knows this country like a book, and he tore

some of the *ju-ju* towns up by the roots looking for Debenham. But it wasn't any use. Poor Deb hasn't come back yet, and we've stopped hoping he will."

Miss Severoid's hand went out and rested lightly on Davie's arm.

"You knew—this man—Debenham?"

Her voice was very quiet, and Davie could not have explained the sensation he had then.

He was a little afraid of her; a queer sort of fear that was not unpleasant, but tempting. It was as if the delicate fingers that were creeping down his arm to his hand were, like her eyes, charged with some magnetic power that held him still and quiet—just looking at her.

Many minutes seemed to pass before he managed to answer:

"Y-yes—oh, yes. We worked together. I liked him, and I think he had a much bigger heart than most of the other fellows believed. They said he was a conceited kid, but he and I were about the same age, so maybe I understood him better. I know he was pretty good to me—kind, you know, without making a fuss about it, and that means a lot to a greenhorn in the first week or two."

Miss Severoid's fingers had slipped down to his hand, and he felt the sudden pressure of them with the same startling effects of an electric shock.

But he did not move. Her eyes would not let him.

He could hear the engineer tinkering with the boiler and, somewhere beyond the light of the little cabin lamp, the steady swish of paddles came to his ears.

"I see." Miss Severoid's fingers released their grip upon his hand as if loath to let it go.

Davie did not in the least understand what she meant. A little confused, he began fumbling with his helmet again for lack of anything better to do.

Followed an exceptionally awkward quiet.

And then, with such suddenness that they both jumped, the wailing scream of a launch siren cut the stillness like a cry of a soul in torment. A great black thing that carried no lights came out of the murk like a fantom and slipped alongside the *Violet* before Davie or his companion had recovered from their surprise sufficiently to guess at anything.

The young man sprang to his feet, and Miss Severoid followed him quickly to the cabin doorway.

"What's the trouble?" a large voice asked, and a firm foot trod the *Violet's* deck forward.

There was no answer. The work upon the boiler ceased. Davie heard something like a groan, but no sound of a struggle. He caught Miss Severoid's arm impulsively and drew her back into the cabin.

"Just—just sit down. It's all right. I'll talk to him."

And his hand went below his light flannel coat to his hip.

Miss Severoid's quick eyes caught the movement and understood it. She emitted a smothered little scream, clutched Davie's good right arm, and held on to it as though her life depended upon it.

"You mustn't! It isn't so bad—"

"Let go! For Heaven's sake, Miss Severoid, it's—"

"Quite right, young man," came a voice through the open skylight above. "But Miss Severoid has better judgment than you have. Drop it!"

Both Miss Severoid and Davie glanced sharply upward and stood suddenly apart, the young man staring foolishly into the broad, clean-shaven face of a man whose coal-black eyes laughed down at him derisively, and in whose hand reposed—and reposed is the word—a revolver of most capable dimensions.

Miss Severoid backed away from it instinctively;

but she made no sound; just gazed into the intruder's face more in surprised interest than fear.

Davie's revolver clattered to the cabin deck.

"Thanks. Now you can kick it under the seat."

Davie's obedience was sheepish but prompt, and his weapon had hardly vanished when the stranger disappeared and appeared again in the cabin doorway. It seemed almost too narrow to allow his massive shoulders to get through.

"Hope I didn't frighten you, Miss Severoid?" he apologized, and his revolver was in its holster. "My name is Clavering—at your service."

CHAPTER III

EMULATING CLAUDE DUVAL

As he stood there, helmet in hand, the personification of cool ease and courtesy, a casual observer would never have believed him to be the man report said he was; that he had robbed and ravaged and killed just for the love of it.

But in riding breeches and puttees, with his soft blue shirt thrown open at the neck, just hinting at the breadth and depth of the chest and the freedom of the wild life he led, he instantly gave the impression of a wealth of strength and an inordinate ability to do things with much speed and, probably, startling effect.

One would never have questioned his ability to take care of himself. A little over six feet in height and built in admirable proportion, he radiated action and a restless, untiring dynamic force that not only ignored the laws of man but seemingly of nature as well.

His features were lean, almost sharp, all the strength and vivacity in his face being centered in his gleaming white teeth and in the glistening blackness of his eyes. Both smiled or snapped; in the latter case his mouth showed thin and somewhat cruel.

His eyebrows were heavy, of a darker shade than his hair, which, closely trimmed for comfort, was rather thin above the temples.

Davie regarded him in mingled dismay, admiration, and horror; but Miss Severoid, to whom the situation was even more strange, was neither dismayed nor horrified—simply interested.

She studied Clavering for a moment or two as though she were but mildly questioning the reason for the intrusion; then, with a slight inclination of the head and a smile that acknowledged his introduction of himself, she said sweetly:

"You will pardon me if I do not quite understand the meaning of these melodramatic effects? I've just arrived, you know, and, being led to understand that I was to be prepared for anything in this terrible country, I presume this isn't so unusual as it seems. But might I ask who and what you are, Mr. Clavering; and just how much service you can be to us? At present we are badly in need of a launch that will go."

Davie was startled—so much so that he transferred his attention from Clavering to Miss Severoid, and his expression of indecision and amazement was comical.

Clavering's eyes narrowed a little. White women he had met with usually employed screams or hysterics in situations of the sort.

"Quite refreshing, Miss Severoid, I assure you," he approved with a cynical smile. "Your engineer did his best to get into the boiler when he caught sight of me, and your escort thought it necessary to produce fire-arms even before he saw me. Which might suggest that I am not altogether respectable. But if you are in need of a launch and are willing to use mine, I shall be glad to take you anywhere you wish to go."

"That isn't definite enough, I'm afraid," Miss Severoid returned with a quaint, alluring smile. "You don't look like a desperado. Might I ask if you are so desperate as to warrant a price upon your head?"

"Just five thousand," came the reply easily and with an apologetic note, as though the amount were not enough to do him honor. "The launch I've got belongs to the commissioner at Forcados, so you can be sure that it is perfectly sound. Your engineer won't

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Davie regarded him in mingled dismay, admiration, and horror; but Miss Severoid, to whom the situation was even more strange, was neither dismayed nor horrified—simply interested.

She studied Clavering for a moment or two as though she were but mildly questioning the reason for the intrusion; then, with a slight inclination of the head and a smile that acknowledged his introduction of himself, she said sweetly:

"You will pardon me if I do not quite understand the meaning of these melodramatic effects? I've just arrived, you know, and, being led to understand that I was to be prepared for anything in this terrible country, I presume this isn't so unusual as it seems. But might I ask who and what you are, Mr. Clavering; and just how much service you can be to us? At present we are badly in need of a launch that will go."

Davie was startled—so much so that he transferred his attention from Clavering to Miss Severoid, and his expression of indecision and amazement was comical.

Clavering's eyes narrowed a little. White women he had met with usually employed screams or hysterics in situations of the sort.

"Quite refreshing, Miss Severoid, I assure you," he approved with a cynical smile. "Your engineer did his best to get into the boiler when he caught sight of me, and your escort thought it necessary to produce fire-arms even before he saw me. Which might suggest that I am not altogether respectable. But if you are in need of a launch and are willing to use mine, I shall be glad to take you anywhere you wish to go."

"That isn't definite enough, I'm afraid," Miss Severoid returned with a quaint, alluring smile. "You don't look like a desperado. Might I ask if you are so desperate as to warrant a price upon your head?"

"Just five thousand," came the reply easily and with an apologetic note, as though the amount were not enough to do him honor. "The launch I've got belongs to the commissioner at Forcados, so you can be sure that it is perfectly sound. Your engineer won't

bined with the stories he had told, had made the Mission Lady a little sick, since she was so unenthusiastic and essayed no immediate comments upon the character of the man in the launch ahead.

He was on the point of suggesting the freer air of the deck when she looked up at him and asked:

"You are sure all that is true? You really believe that he has killed people—in cold blood?"

"Well, I'm only telling what I've heard," Davie defended. "I've never seen him do it, of course. But McClure says a man can't pillage and plunder and live as the Jackrie does without having to do some very nasty things now and then to keep his grip.

"And fear is the only master these beasts know. You can't treat them decently. They won't let you. If you are good to them they think you are a fool—soft, you know—and they'll walk all over you. A punch on the jaw will put more Christianity into them than the Lord's prayer."

Then Davie remembered that he was talking to a mission lady. "Oh—I—er—I beg pardon! I forgot that—"

"I taught the Lord's prayer? But that doctrine isn't original with you, is it? You are quoting the Mr. McClure you mentioned, are you not?"

"Well—yes—he said that," Davie admitted, coloring; then added desperately: "But I know it's the truth. Mac rarely says anything that isn't."

"I see. And what does Mr. McClure think of Mr. Clavering?"

"He'd shoot him on sight."

"On principle, or for that five thousand Mr. Clavering spoke about?"

"Just for personal satisfaction, I fancy. Clavering got away with a shipment of Marsden & Co.'s oil once, and Mac's never forgotten it."

Davie stooped, then got down on his knees to burrow below the seat for his revolver. The Mission Lady watched him quietly till he straightened, then held out her hand.

"Give me that, please."

"Wh-what—the revolver?"

"Yes, please."

Davie hesitated a moment, then handed the weapon over to her in a mechanical fashion.

"Thank you," Miss Severoid acknowledged, and made Davie gasp as she put the weapon into a small leather hand-bag she carried. "I'm just afraid you are too loyal to Mr. McClure to resist the temptation to be discourteous to our host if the chance offered—and I've a suspicion that he'd shoot first and straighter, anyway. So we'd better let him go this time, hadn't we?"

With a pleasant little smile, and, taking the hand-bag with her, she passed him and went out on deck.

Not at all sure of his attitude, Davie watched her go; then followed hesitatingly, doubtful whether he should or not. He stopped as he saw Miss Severoid standing in the *Violet's* prow, looking straight ahead at the shadowy outline of the leading launch.

He felt that he would be intruding if he joined her. There was something in her fixed and motionless attitude which suggested that she wished to be alone. He experienced an unpleasant sensation that he had suddenly become a super in the little drama that was like a page from the life of *Claude Duval.*

Miss Severoid's conduct was even more surprising than Clavering's cool intention to take them to Segwanga, where the new-born consulate, a detachment of native troops and police, and every trader on the creek would welcome him with enough bullets to make a sieve of him—that is, if they knew he were coming.

One expected Clavering to do spectacular things like that. If he were to walk into the district commissioner's office and offer the D. C. a cigar, Davie would not have been so surprised as he was while he contemplated the Mission Lady's back and wondered what on earth she was thinking about.

And as Davie watched and puzzled his young brain, Segwanga was drawing nearer and nearer every moment.

Winding in and out, missing lazily moving native canoes by a hairbreadth and causing their occupants to call aloud for the protection of their river gods, plunging on through a darkness one might have cut with a knife, with the bank of bush upon either side following them relentlessly every inch of the way like a black ghost, they finally whirled into the broad Segwanga Creek.

Swaying a little with the motion of the launch, Miss Severoid still stood in the *Violet's* prow, and Davie remained leaning against the rail, wondering what the dénouement might be.

Segwanga Creek was about half a mile wide. Upon the left bank, stretching a little over a mile to the Saganna curve, were the seven trading stations, the consulate, and the mission.

First, and directly opposite the narrow creek from which the launches emerged, was Carey & Co.'s "factory"—the origin of the word "factory" being somewhat of a mystery, since none of the trading stations ever manufactured anything. Then came Bates & Mahler's, then Perkins & Gray's, then the mission, which was separated from Marsden & Co.'s "beach" by a small creek that was crossed by a rather indifferent wooden bridge.

Beyond Marsden's was the consulate, a comparatively recent addition to the settlement's importance;

and beyond that again came the African Produce Association, and, lastly among the whites, the German representatives of Bach & Co., of Hamburg.

It was shortly after ten o'clock.

Hurricane lanterns, swinging idly in the hands of patrolling watch-boys, could be seen moving to and fro upon the water-front of every station. Dark shapes of huge storage-houses loomed up behind them. In the white men's living quarters—always one flight up to get away from white ants and the like—shaded oil-lamps shed their light upon the card-table, the month-old newspaper, the weekly letter home, the business report, or the meeting of congenial spirits in a convivial mood.

Such meetings were constant, and were often followed by severe pains in the back of the head and a vast consumption of quinin pills.

Viewed from the river, however, Segwanga was a dark and dreary prospect. A few lights amid a bank of gloom; spectral shapes of indistinct outbuildings; the bobbing lights the watch-boys carried—and silence.

Occasionally the echo of loud laughter came faintly across the water, but that was all. Had Davie been able to see the Mission Lady's face he might have observed her lips form a taut, pained line, and a tiny handkerchief was carried surreptitiously up to her eyes, to dab them with almost vicious impatience at her weakness.

Clavering's launch—or rather the one he had acquired—made little sound, but he did not seem to care whether it did or not. He steered directly and without any attempt at concealment to the little mission wharf.

Running alongside it, he allowed the *Violet* to ease in upon the tow-line till she, too, huddled against the wharf close to the landing-steps.

Two watch-boys with insufficient lanterns hovered like gnomes overhead, peering down at the mystery of two launches, one of which carried no lights.

A colored maid chattered an endless stream of questions behind them. The Rev. James Steel and his extremely powerful wife were hurrying across the mission beach to welcome their new assistant.

She had turned leisurely from her place in the *Violet's* prow and was dubiously considering the landing-steps, upon which Davie stood, ready to assist her over the rail.

She put out her hand, and Davie had almost seized it, when a soft, cat-like step sounded behind her.

Wheeling instantly, with a little gasp of surprise, she felt herself suddenly swept into two steel-like arms that held her powerless—and apparently speechless, too.

"My toll, Miss Severoid," Clavering whispered softly, and in a second had tilted up her face so that she looked straight into the glowing blackness of his eyes.

She had a cat at home with eyes like that.

Davie stared and almost fell off the landing-steps.

But Clavering was in no hurry. He bent his head very slowly, conscious of his strength; and he seemed for a moment or two to be gloating over his victim's physical weakness.

She did not struggle, though he could feel her shrink in his grasp as his lips drew nearer and nearer to her own.

Davie, powerless and frantic, whispered something excitedly to one of the Kroo watch-boys, who turned and vanished.

The young man was on the point of jumping from the step to Miss Severoid's assistance when he saw Clavering's head jerk upward and heard him give vent

to a short, sharp oath that died in a breathless silence, as the outlaw clapped his hand to his belt—where his revolver should have been.

Miss Severoid had it, and the point of the barrel was pressing uncomfortably into his ribs.

But Davie did not see that. He could not understand why Clavering did not kiss his "prisoner."

"Turn!" she said very quietly.

Clavering did not move; not even the left arm that was wound about her shoulders.

In the dim light it was almost impossible for those on the wharf to know what was happening, and for a few brief seconds the two were a world unto themselves. Davie's white, open-mouthed countenance, the dusky faces above the flickering hurricane lights, the approaching footsteps of the missionary and his wife, were things apart.

Clavering smiled and murmured:

"A gray hag in Walla's town told me once that a woman would one day lead me to the nearest mango-tree with a good thick rope. Just move that gun an inch or so higher and shoot. I'd hate hanging—sure of it."

"Remove your arm and turn," came the passionless command.

"Which way?"

"Toward your launch."

"Oh—I see!" The arm slipped slowly from Miss Severoid's shoulder, and Clavering laughed oddly. "Thanks, very much. You are a wonderful woman!"

Suddenly a bell on the mission beach rang furiously, and kept on ringing. Davie, still confused, leaped up the steps, plunged past the missionary and his wife, and vanished toward an avenue of cocoanut-palms and the little wooden bridge leading to Marsden's beach.

Other bells began to ring their answer, one by one;

a clamor of sound that was deafening after so deep a silence.

Men's voices leaped into abrupt, shouting life, and one could hear the padding of many feet upon the greasy *chicoco* as the settlement answered the call of the mission bell's alarm.

Clavering marched along the *Violet's* deck ahead of Miss Severoid without altering his pace, climbed into the Forcados commissioner's launch, turned and bowed, and called back amiably out of the murk:

"Thank you again. Apologies are useless, I suppose. *Au revoir!*"

"Good-by!" There was no life in it.

The revolver spun through the darkness and clattered to the deck at Clavering's feet, and Miss Severoid, tight-lipped and white as chalk, turned in leisurely fashion toward the steps again. There the missionary and his wife, all unconscious of what she had done, awaited her with welcoming arms.

Before she reached them Clavering and his launch had slipped out from the wharf, and by the time she had, with the missionary's assistance, negotiated a safe landing the outlaw was lost in the darkness of midstream.

The siren screamed blatant defiance—once, twice, thrice—and wailed dismally into silence.

And though Segwanga, to a man, searched for him with every available launch on the river, into the gray of the morning, it did not find him.

But then it had not expected to.

The harmattan had made but one more claim to his title.

CHAPTER IV

THE MESSENGER

SEGWANGA talked of Clavering's latest caper and of the new Mission Lady's rather hazy share in it for several days, till the sacking of an oil-yard at Saganna gave the community something else to chalk up against the irrepressible outlaw.

That was Clavering's way. He rarely gave the public time to get properly acquainted with one surprise before he furnished it with another.

Upon the day following her eventful arrival Miss Severoid returned Davie Tait's revolver with an apologetic note that concluded whimsically:

"I feel as if I owe you five thousand pounds."

Remembering the opportunity he had had while standing upon the mission wharf steps, Davie, who had not admitted the cause of his defenseless condition to any one, felt that she was right. But he murmured "Rats!" quite manfully, and tried to forget about it. Not the five thousand pounds, but Miss Severoid.

Which was not so easy as it seemed.

Apart from the note to Davie, Miss Severoid said nothing. That is, nothing of importance, not even to the missionary and his wife, who, of course, plied her with natural and pertinent questions upon the matter.

She said she had been "terribly frightened." But, naïvely admitting that since the experience was safely over she would not have missed it for worlds, she proceeded apparently to set her mind and energies to the business of becoming thoroughly acquainted with the

routine of missionary work and with her immediate surroundings.

The latter were rather enervating, though the mission-house, built of galvanized iron and lined with pitch-pine, was a modest and comfortable residence, to which she took kindly.

But the mission hall was a dreary sort of place—another galvanized iron structure that became intolerably hot as the blinding tropical sun beat unmercifully down upon it.

There was a mud hut of large dimensions at the rear of the clearing, and, though the native help had had more civilized quarters erected for them immediately behind the mission-house, the majority of them preferred the mud hut.

It was a small clearing; much smaller than any of the trading beaches, all of which had been solidified by *chicoco,* which is a greasy, peatlike clay that proves excellent material for the purpose of converting swamps into habitable ground.

The mission was bounded on the right and rear by the sullen, unchanging bush, and upon the front and left by water. Beyond the bank of green on the right, and reached by a bush-path scarcely broader than the sole of a flat, native foot, lay Perkins & Gray's, and upon the left, by way of an avenue of coconut-palms and across the little wooden bridge that spanned the narrow creek already referred to, was Marsden & Co.'s, the largest and busiest trading station in the settlement.

Miss Severoid could see it from her corner of the mission veranda; the long, squat kernel-house in the foreground, and the large, two-storied residence, built upon raised ground behind it; the shop on the ground floor, the white living quarters above.

Another huge storehouse that stretched almost from

the concrete breakwater to the consulate boundary line contained everything from Chicago canned meats to coffins. The former not infrequently led to the latter.

All the buildings were of galvanized iron and painted a soft green.

To the left of the storehouse was a great roofed yard, filled with lumber and empty casks; and casks that were filled with oil and earthenware and ships' biscuits.

Three coopers and two carpenters from Accra were kept busy from dawn to darkness, and two young white men, whom Miss Severoid did not know, seemed to be incessantly moving about the beach, paying out cargo, purchasing oil or rubber, or attending to the thousand and one sweltering little details that fall to the lot of the beach clerk.

She could see the pack of canoes, laden with produce or filled with "pay," huddling the concrete breakwater, while their owners, with their women and boys, swarmed upon the beach like black ants. Sometimes she caught sight of Davie Tait buying kernels in the smothering heat of the kernel-house.

But it was to a *punkah*-cooled corner of Marsden & Co.'s veranda that her attention most frequently drifted—the corner overlooking the river, and which was shaded by the leafy expanse of a great mango-tree that reared its broad head past the veranda and tried to peep over the roof.

In that shady corner, fanned by an artificial zephyr produced by a gently swinging *punkah,* she saw a giant of a man, who rarely left a great Madeira chair, parley like an East Indian nabob with all sorts and conditions of natives, and with the air of one accustomed to being feared and respected and always obeyed.

The Madeira chair seemed to be a sort of judgment-seat, and the big man's decisions, whatever they were

about, were evidently accepted as final. Miss Severoid watched him interestedly and guessed that he was McClure—the man who would shoot Clavering on sight.

After distantly studying his movements for a while she finally believed he would.

Her work was novel and interesting; the natives queer, half clothed, and childish. They came to the mission hall in motley swarms, regarded her with gaping intentness, and jabbered among themselves their conclusions regarding her.

They appeared to have a deep-seated respect for the Rev. James Steel, who was a tall, gaunt, kindly man, of very few words. His wife, almost as tall and much larger, was even more kindly and certainly more talkative. With her husband she had been in several parts of the West Coast for a number of years, ignoring the woman's usual privilege of going home during the rainy season.

The deadly, fever-laden climate actually seemed to agree with her.

She "adopted" Miss Severoid at once, and sometimes during that first week, surreptitiously studying the new assistant's strong and beautiful face, the kindly soul's eyes became sad. She told her husband in strictest confidence as they were seated in their private corner of the mission veranda one evening that she was afraid Miss Severoid was not the type for the work they had to do.

"She is too beautiful, James. They'll be gaping at her face instead of paying attention to their letters. I saw our Beau Brummel hanging about the hall door yesterday morning just before school hour, and he actually ogled at the girl as we passed him. He was there again this morning. I shouldn't be surprised to

find him in the class to-morrow, even though he is a chief."

The missionary lowered a month-old newspaper an inch or two, and looked over the top of his glasses at his wife.

"Chief Cralla of Akerri, you mean?"

"Of course! And looking more spick and span than ever. Miss Severoid asked who he was, and this morning seemed anxious to talk to him. There is something queer and uncanny about her—something mysterious. She is too quiet. There is something going on behind those big, blue eyes of hers incessantly, and when she looks at me—at *me,* James, and I'm an old woman—I feel weak, positively her inferior in everything. Haven't you noticed it?"

"Nonsense, Martha!" the missionary deprecated, but his tone lacked conviction. "She's only a child."

"Child, fiddlesticks! She's twenty-five if she's a day—a woman of experience, and a beautiful one, with a will of her own. She'll have Segwanga at her feet before a month is gone, and it won't be the least bit of a novelty to her either. She's accustomed to it. Any one can see that. When she took tiffin with us this afternoon, you asked her three times if she had had any sugar—and you never were that absent-minded over *me* in your life!"

Steel laughed and, putting his paper quietly aside, groped in the semi-darkness of a green-shaded reading-lamp for his wife's wonderfully soft but serviceable hand and, finding it, sat very still and quiet.

The watch-boy, passing with a scuffling gait below the veranda, sang a plaintive three-lined dirge to the moon. Chief Cralla's great canoe, with a native grass-mat awning overhead, dipped down the silver, glinting

river toward Akerri, to the rhythmic swish of forty paddles.

And Miss Severoid, who had retired to her rooms upon the other side of the house after dinner, upon the plea of having letters to write, lay at full length, face downward, upon her bed, crushing a small, white piece of paper in her hand.

It had come through her open windows barely fifteen minutes before, and the note read:

> You most wonderful of women, this is true homage, and in spite of a certain prophecy I told you of I am tempting fate again—and you. The freedom you gifted me is of little importance to me if it is of no interest to you what I do with it.
>
> Why did you let me go free?
>
> If there is any answer to that question, Chief Cralia is my friend, and yours. G. C.

Miss Severoid did not sleep very well that night.

Next morning, a little paler than usual, returning to her rooms after breakfasting with the missionary and his wife, she glanced expectantly out of her windows at the jabbering, shuffling mob of natives who, in their multi-colored best, were gathering by way of Marsden's and the little wooden bridge to attend the morning class.

The majority of them came with childlike curiosity, always expecting something new and startling. Then, when the class was over and they had learned the eighth commandment once more, they would disperse to the several trading beaches and instinctively steal what they could.

In the midst of that greasy crew, resplendent in sunhelmet and white flannel coat, with a gorgeous skirted cloth trailing behind him, Chief Cralla strode majestically toward the mission hall.

Time and again he had to stop and accept the kneeling obeisance which is the due of a chief when greeted

by the smaller fry among his people. Miss Severoid, watching him, seemed to be weighing him carefully in the balance.

When she turned and went slowly to her little writing-table, her eyes had no warmth in them. Deliberately, as though she was signing some one's death-warrant, she wrote upon a single sheet of thin, foreign note-paper:

Isn't it rather cowardly to ask me to answer any questions through a colored medium of Chief Cralla's type?

Suppose, for instance, some one were to see me give this note to him? But then, men rarely do think of the woman's danger. They are too busy planning to evade their own.

I am sorry you are such a disappointment. Good-by.

Without even initialing it, she rolled it up into a little ball and went back to the windows. She caught the watchful, oily chief's eye almost immediately, and though others saw her there, and grimaced up at her and greeted her in Jackrie over and over again, like this: *"Doh—doh-doh—doh—doh,"* none but Cralla understood what she meant when she tossed a small, white pellet a few inches into the air and caught it again.

She did that several times. When she was sure that Cralla really understood, she donned her helmet, joined Mrs. Steel and went sedately with her toward the mission hall.

The chief's tawny, un-ethiopian face was wreathed in a bland Ethiopian smile as they approached, and he doffed his helmet as to the manner born, displaying the dignity of his gray head until they had passed.

Mrs. Steel was plainly disturbed, and Miss Severoid, glancing into Cralla's face for a second, looked quickly away—also disturbed. His eyes frightened her a little. They were so black and shifty and covetous, and the puttylike lumps on his forehead and cheeks looked

more prominent and unsightly than ever. In fact, she had hardly noticed them before.

But for all her distrust, a small, white paper pellet dropped unostentatiously at his naked feet, and his left foot slid over it instantly, but without haste.

For a few moments, still following Miss Severoid's trim figure with half-closed eyes, his toes worked convulsively.

Then, with an expressive Jackrie grunt of satisfaction, he shuffled away, leaving no pellet behind him.

CHAPTER V

IN SEARCH OF PROTECTION

THAT afternoon, in the cool of the day after four o'clock, Davie Tait was standing at the kernel-house door, idly watching his two kernel-boys, in shameful nakedness, chasing a mangrove-fly with their loin-cloths.

Mangrove-flies have to be chased, or they will sting and lay their eggs under one's skin; and the eggs, in the natural course of events, hatch—which is a painful process for the stung.

A group of small, native traders squatted under the kernel-house awning counting their pay for produce they had sold earlier in the day. The pay consisted of piece-cloth, gin, iron cooking-pots, rice, salt, and other necessities of life, which would be sold the following day at the native markets and once more converted, at a profit, into palm-nut kernels, palm oil, or rubber.

The group, evidently composed of a "pool," was having difficulty in arriving at a division satisfactory to all parties, and they jabbered and screeched and gesticulated at one another, always seeming on the point of a fight.

Lack of an adequate vocabulary made it necessary for them to use their hands and lungs to the best possible advantage so as to make their meaning quite clear.

Apart from the group a mother was industriously shaving the top of a small, wool-covered head with a very poor razor, indulging her artistic fancy by blocking out her offspring's hair into oddly shaped tufts that

reminded Davie of the trimming of a French poodle. The child, little more than an infant in arms, was bawling lusty objection, to which no one paid any heed.

Several Kroo boys, the laborers of the trading stations, acted as scavengers, clearing the beach of refuse after the day's business. The canoes moored under the lea of the breakwater had thinned out until Davie could easily have counted them.

A few black and native waifs were enjoying a swim in the swift-running creek, using the oil wharf as a diving-board. As one of them, swinging out over the water at the end of the hoisting-chain of the hand-crane, dangled and capered like his near relative the monkey, then dropped with a blood-curdling yell and a splash on top of a hapless companion, Davie saw a trim figure in white emerge from the palm grove leading to the mission beach and step across the little wooden bridge.

The oil clerk, coming from the yard behind the wharf at that moment, paused to remonstrate forcibly with the bathing urchins for tampering with his hand-crane. He used both tongue and feet to rapid and effective advantage, his language making dark-blue incisions in the sultry atmosphere.

Then, glancing toward the bridge, he stopped quite suddenly and his thin, fever-yellowed face took on a deep-red hue that spread below the soft collar of his shirt and to the roots of what little hair his stuffy pith helmet had allowed him to keep. He vanished hurriedly into the oil yard again and lost himself in a maze of lumber and casks, while a big, sandy-haired man, leaning over the rail of the house veranda above the shop, grinned and departed hastily to the Madeira chair in the mango-shaded corner overlooking the river.

As for Davie, he instantly wished he had put on the gray-flannel trousers his boy had laid out for him at

noon. The white ducks he wore were disreputably streaked with oil and black with kernel dust, and his serviceable working shirt had just that afternoon become partly separated from its neckband in a rumpus with a husky kernel thief whom Davie's accurate right foot had finally precipitated into the river.

Altogether the young man felt uncomfortably dirty, and Miss Severoid looked exactly the reverse.

Her helmet had been put aside for the day. A broad-brimmed panama had taken its place and, in white from head to foot, with the faintest touch of color at her throat, she would have been as fascinatingly conspicuous in a crowd.

Alone, and the only young white woman within Heaven only knew how many miles, she was raised upon a pedestal instinctively and at once.

Watching her approach, and coloring behind the dust and streaking perspiration-marks that gave his face a "working" appearance, Davie was quite sure that he loved her, or would very soon. But when, smiling sweetly and bowing from afar, she went right on to the stairs leading up to the house veranda, he felt an unaccountable desire to sit down.

It was a terrible disappointment, and Davie felt it so keenly that, before he was aware of it, he was discoursing to himself upon the ingratitude and fickleness of womankind, of whom Miss Severoid was no better than her sisters.

A very small and very shiny black person met Miss Severoid at the top of the veranda stairs. His name was Agigi, and his age was as much of a mystery as his smooth baby face that glowed with innocence or, as the occasion sometimes demanded, became splendid in haughty indifference.

He was McClure's special henchman—a child valet who could serve a liqueur at a look or guard his mas-

ter's privacy against any onslaught by a mere shake of the head.

In Miss Severoid's case, in spite of the orders he had received, he hesitated. She was outside his experience, and his black, cherubic face looked troubled.

Then he came to himself and nodded and—smiled! Which was revolutionary.

Agigi had never so far forgotten himself as to smile upon a visitor before. As he led Miss Severoid along the veranda and around to the shady corner overlooking the river he seemed rather crestfallen and ashamed.

Daniel McClure uncurled himself from his Madeira chair and stood waiting as his visitor, light of foot, came into view.

He was a big, broad man of an exceptionally powerful build, and his parents had been Scotch-Irish. But since he had been born on a tramp steamer somewhere between Cape Town and Bombay, and had since lived under almost every flag of any consequence, he was a citizen of the world—a *cosmopolite* who had an equal acquaintance with the Avenue de l'Opera and the Bowery, with Bond Street and the squalor of Port Said, with the wharves of Shanghai and the torpid mysteries of the Amazon.

He dwarfed the majority of men, mentally as well as physically, not because he had gathered his knowledge of people and things in the quiet of a university, but because he had seen most of what he knew with his own cold-gray eyes.

No one would have accused him of the crime of pulchritude. But his nose was straight and lean enough, his heavy, sandy mustache well trimmed, his massive jaw clean shaven, his teeth strong and white and good. His glance, though habitually lazy and cold, held an illusive twinkle that hinted at the possibility of the world being a constant source of

amusement to him—an amusement he seemed to accept rather contemptuously.

But when he did smile, it was a broad, glistening affair, altogether genuine.

He gave an instant impression of things large and worth while; a man who, by reason of his long and powerful arms and the breadth of his shoulders, seemed capable of lifting obstacles from his path rather than climbing over them. And his riotous crown of sandy hair acted as a sort of beacon-light of warning to any one who might seek to run foul of his wrath.

In spite of all that, however, the moment he caught sight of Miss Severoid's face his jaw sagged a little and he stared at her foolishly, as though he doubted his eyesight.

But only for a moment. As she came nearer he bowed and smiled.

"Miss Severoid, I presume. My assistant, Mr. Tait, told me a little about you. My name is McClure."

Miss Severoid returned his smile and looked steadily up at him as Agigi, with a puzzled expression upon his face, sauntered back to his post.

"And Mr. Tait told me about you," she said in a low voice. "I hope I am not intruding upon your leisure hours. I came to pay our bill—and to become acquainted."

"Thank you. Won't you sit down?"

McClure bowed toward a chair, and Miss Severoid accepted it with another sweet smile.

"People who bring money never intrude at any time," he went on, "but I appreciate it doubly this time, since it affords me the opportunity of knowing you. And now that I've said the proper thing, what is the proper thing to do? Offer you tea?"

"No, thanks." Another smile. "I've just had tiffin. Are you a stickler for form, Mr. McClure?

Some one on the steamer coming out told me that traders were a rough sort of crowd—but you don't look at all rough. Perhaps you are the exception that—"

"No, I'm afraid not," deliberately. "I am in this business for the material purpose of making money—and I'm doing it. I have but one ambition meantime, and that is to buy at the lowest price I can more oil and rubber and kernels than any other two firms on the river. I am doing that, too.

"I leave sociology and uplift and government to those who are paid to attend to them. Perhaps I am helping to develop the native's business sense—but I don't think that is necessary. And I do not care for the generalities of steamer-deck critics. They are usually young or inexperienced or drunk. Did you have a pleasant trip?"

Miss Severoid leaned back in her chair and, laughing softly, fixed McClure with a quiet, penetrating look that was uncomfortable.

"How much is the bill, please?" she asked simply.

"Er—eh—just a moment. Boy!"

His thunderous voice, in lieu of a bell, echoed and reëchoed, and had scarcely died away when a surly-looking black steward appeared and stood at attention.

"Ask Mr. Gilmore to give you the mission bill for the month. I'm waiting."

"Yessah."

The boy vanished and proceeded down-stairs to the shop beneath, passing Chief Cralla on the way.

Agigi, who was not visible from the shady corner, sat on the top step of the stairs, motionless as a little black god, with a changeless look of simplicity upon his face.

Cralla reached him and grumbled something in Jack-

rie that deprecated Agigi's duty and station, but the boy shook his head mournfully. The chief, though his eyes blazed and his tongue searched for adequate expletives, went no farther.

He knew better. Once upon a time a Jackrie of large importance had scorned Agigi's edict, and McClure had thrown him down-stairs again—on his head. Cralla evidently did not care for that sort of recreation, so he sat down on the second step from the top and waited.

"Find your new work interesting?" McClure asked his visitor after several indifferently successful attempts to make conversation and watching her face more closely than he knew.

"Oh, yes. Everything is so queer and different."

"Including friend Clavering? Handsome, daredevil sort of chap, isn't he? I've never met him."

"Well," musingly, "I did not think he was so very handsome. His mouth was too wicked. But he had a certain sort of fascination that was—well—disturbing. It was an interesting experience."

"Yes, I judge it must have been. Clavering is a host in himself. I'd like"—with a grim, elusive smile—"to meet him."

"Would you? What would you do if you did?"

"Shoot him," very quietly and convincingly.

"Really!" Miss Severoid eyed McClure till his glance wavered and shifted. Then with a quiet little smile she asked softly: "Are you sure he would not shoot—first?"

McClure threw his head back and grinned.

"Well, yes, he might. Now that you mention it, I think it would be rather interesting to know whether he is the faster at that game."

Miss Severoid sat up a little and stopped twisting the soft leather handle of her hand-bag.

"You mean you think *you* are? In a battle of wits and bullets you would not be afraid of him?"

The trader caught the faintest hint of anxiety in her tone, and it puzzled him.

"No. Why do you ask? Do you think I might be?"

And Miss Severoid's eyes became softly apologetic, then a little furtive, then pleaded as plainly as they could plead for a strong man's protection.

"No, I didn't think so," she said in a whispering voice. "I was sure you wouldn't be. That's why I wanted to—to come here to-day and tell you that he—he's bothering me."

A harsh sound emanated from the depths of McClure's great body and he half rose out of his chair.

"Sh!" Miss Severoid cautioned, and, leaning over, laid a restraining hand upon his arm—a touch that startled him quite as much as her confession and made him sink back into his chair again—docile—just looking at her.

Davie Tait had done the same thing.

"You mustn't!" she pleaded softly. "Not yet. I couldn't tell Mr. and Mrs. Steel, somehow. I'm afraid they'd be horribly shocked. And I don't want people to begin talking about things they don't understand. You know, I can see you sitting here from my veranda. Perhaps you've noticed me?"

McClure nodded in a strange helplessness he did not understand. He knew perfectly well that it was not hypnotism. He was tingling pleasantly from head to foot.

"Well," the soft, dulcet voice went on, "I have been watching you—have seen how big and imperious you are, and—and, oh! you've been just like a—a raja or something like that, sitting in that big chair ordering everybody about. And people seemed to be so very

respectful, I thought you must be big in mind as well as body, and when his note came, and I got so terribly frightened, I—well—I just thought of you at once. Was I right?"

Her fingers tightened upon his coat-sleeve, and as he felt their nervous pressure he had a keener appreciation of his strength. He did not tell her that most of his rajalike attitude was plain haggling with the native traders over the price he was willing to pay them for their produce.

And she was such a little woman, too—so soft and gentle, with a motherliness in her eyes and about her mouth that carried him back years and years to a time when—

"Was I right?" she pleaded again anxiously.

McClure gave a faint start.

"Miss Severoid, I am honored, and I shall be glad to help you and, if necessary, protect you with all the powers at my command. Your confidence is perfectly safe with me—with none safer."

Listening to the sound of his own voice, he marveled at his volubility.

"Oh, I'm so glad, and I believe in you! You see, this is a terrible place, and—"

"It *is* a terrible place, and it is no place for a woman—"

He was going to say "like you," but he thought better of it, and asked: "You say you had a note. When?"

"Last night. It came into my room through the open window; and I couldn't find out who had thrown it in. It frightened me, and—and I don't think I'm such a terrible coward."

"No woman who comes out here alone is a coward," McClure assured her quietly. "Might I ask what was in the note?"

"Oh, nothing much. I tore it up. He—he said—that is, he asked me why I had not let him kiss me that night I arrived. You know, he tried to."

McClure's jaws tightened slowly.

There were a few moments of silence in which the lazy buzz of life on the beach below came up to them. Miss Severoid twisted a small handkerchief round and round her finger, and the trader watched her with a black cloud of wrath hanging over his eyes.

"You did not—answer the note, of course?"

Miss Severoid looked up, startled. The shuffling feet of the steward warned them of his approach.

"Gracious, no!" she whispered in horror, then smiled. "How could I, even if I wanted to? I shouldn't know where to send it."

The steward turned the corner with the mission-house bill.

CHAPTER VI

SIGNALS

THE bill was paid and the usual weekly order for provisions sent down to the shop clerk to be filled. As Miss Severoid folded the receipt and placed it in her hand-bag, McClure stood looking down at her quizzically, wondering if, in spite of her fear of Clavering, she really appreciated the unscrupulous character of the man.

That she had come to him—McClure—for protection and advice was a wonderfully soothing thought. But he was not at all certain of the extent of the protection he might be permitted to afford.

"Do you think it likely that he will be persistent?" he asked quietly, and knew the answer better than his guest.

"I don't know," she answered doubtfully. "I hope not. What on earth am I to do if he is?"

"Ignore him, of course, to begin with. Let me post two good Kroo boys somewhere on the Mission Beach, where they could see and not be seen. I mean at night. No, no, you mustn't be frightened," he reproved gently as Miss Severoid's eyes timidly searched his face. "I know it isn't easy, but I hardly think you are in any real physical danger. If you'd let me post two boys just where I want them I could arrange signals and—"

"No, please—I—that is—I don't want any one else to know—not even Kroo boys. Could—couldn't I arrange signals with you? I am not really afraid of Mr. Clavering, but I'd just like to feel that there was

some one who could help me in case I—I needed it. Don't you understand? Please try to, because I have a horror of people getting to know about it, and talking behind my back in whispers as if—but you understand, don't you?"

McClure thought he did, but when she looked at him like that he was not sure of anything.

The sound of Jackrie gutturals came from the top of the stairs, and a heavy foot pounded down them disgustedly. Cralla had grown tired of waiting.

Agigi sat on, unsmiling and undisturbed.

McClure dug his hands deep into his pockets, glanced toward the river and the straggling canoes upon it. Then meeting Miss Severoid's anxious look he said quietly:

"I think I do, and in a community as small as this is, with life pretty much the same dreary grind from day to day, I'm afraid men become—gossipy. What sort of signals would you suggest?"

"Oh—thank you!"

The burst of gratefulness was very soft and very real. It made McClure fidget and study the river again.

"I knew you would understand, and—and you're very good to me. I wish—" She stopped, tugged at the handkerchief nervously, then went on hurriedly:

"I have two lamps—one with just a plain white shade and the other green. You can see them from here—at least I think you can, because I can see yours. I usually light both of them, and I'll put the green light nearest the windows that look out on the veranda. If you see it go out and the white light in the other room continues burning for a while after, you'll know it's all right. But if the white light goes out first, you'll come at once, won't you?"

"Quicker than that," McClure declared without a smile. "It is good of you to trust me like this, and I hope I shall not fail you. I also hope you will try not to let this thing bother you too much. Clavering is a cold-blooded, unscrupulous hound, but I really do believe he is still—in one or two respects—a gentleman. Think you can remember that?"

Miss Severoid studied him a moment or two doubtfully.

"I'll try—but do you know that you are treating me like a child?" Her eyes and lips smiled tormentingly at him as she quickly rose. "But I'm old enough to appreciate it. Now I must run, or Mrs. Steel will think I am kidnaped."

McClure hardly moved, and Miss Severoid's smile wavered a little, then drifted away. She looked frightened, as a child does when it is not sure whether its mother is pleased or saddened by something it has done.

"Why—what's wrong?" she whispered. "Why do you look at me like that?"

The trader started slightly. He was rather bewildered, and mumbled something unintelligible as he moved suddenly toward the stairs. Miss Severoid had to run a few steps to catch up with his long, heavy strides.

"Good-by," he said simply, "and thank you!"

"Thank *you,*" Miss Severoid corrected sweetly. "And it isn't quite—good-by, is it?"

A smile, a look, the soft, fleeting touch of her hand, and she was gone.

McClure spun upon his heel and walked right into his office, to stop in the center of the floor and look about him guiltily. Then he threw his head back, and his clenched right hand sank with a resounding smack into the palm of his left.

"Lord, what a woman! *What* a woman!"

He paced the floor, muttering to himself for a while, then suddenly yelled for a boy.

There was no immediate answer.

"Boy! Where the devil— Oh, you here, eh? All right. Whisky-and-soda—one time!"

Agigi glanced interrogatively up at his master—a pygmy beside a giant. McClure had never looked quite like that before, and as the boy went out to obey he shot a quick, comprehensive glance over the veranda rail toward the little wooden bridge, where a trim figure in white walked leisurely—a few careful feet behind Chief Cralla.

The child-valet shrugged his narrow shoulders and vanished into the shadows of the "saloon," as the great dining-room was called. The term had a nautical origin, just as the floor was always called the "deck" and the kitchen the "galley."

McClure turned suddenly toward his library table and, unlocking the drawer, drew therefrom, after a minute's rummaging, a photograph he had found among the vanished Ralph Debenham's belongings—a photograph he had feloniously kept for no particular reason except that the face fascinated him.

It was that of a lady in the guise of a shepherdess of a bygone day; but whether she had been in musical comedy or simply at a masquerade was difficult to say. The card was unsigned.

Holding it in his hands and studying the beautiful face line for line, with a look upon his own that was almost greedy, McClure muttered heavily:

"Wonder what the devil she's up to, playing shepherdess across the way!"

Chief Cralla, apparently unconscious of Miss Severoid's presence behind him, strode across the little

wooden bridge with his usual majesty, and passed on into the short avenue of palms that led to the door of the mission hall.

Save for a weary-footed mammy, her baby hunched on her back like a Scotch fishwife's creel, the avenue was deserted. The mammy was trudging on ahead toward Perkins & Gray's.

Miss Severoid was just a little pale, and she watched every step the stalwart chief took as a cat watches an unsuspecting sparrow.

But Cralla did not halt nor give any sign that he knew she was behind him. When a neatly folded *chit* dropped from his right hand and lay directly in Miss Severoid's path, he did not stop to see whether she picked it up or not.

Instead, he increased his pace; walked without a moment's halt out of the palm-grove and across the mission beach, and dived into the bush-path leading to Perkins & Gray's.

Miss Severoid dropped her hand-bag and picked it and the *chit* up together. But the precaution was unnecessary. There was no one behind her.

A little later, having avoided as much as she could a long conversation with the missionary's wife, she reached her rooms. Unfolding the note with fingers that perceptibly trembled, she read:

"I am sorry that my choice of a messenger should have suggested to you that I am cowardly enough to protect myself at your expense. A handkerchief dropped from your sitting-room window this evening after dinner will tell me that I may call and try to improve your impression of me.

"Don't be afraid. I shall be careful not to compromise you in any way. And please remember that the word 'good-by' has no place between you and me. G. C."

Miss Severoid's lips were quite colorless, but in spite of that a queer, satisfied little smile hung upon her lips.

The flaring red, tropical sun dropped beyond the dark-green line of the horizon, tinting the sky with the delicate hues of the rainbow that faded almost as quickly as they came, till, as though heralded by the ringing of "four bells" upon every beach, darkness fell.

A low tap upon the door startled her a little, but, going to the washstand in the little bedroom adjoining, she called clearly:

"Come in!"

A colored maid entered with the lamps.

To Miss Severoid she was a new figure in the household; a lithe, black Venus, coiled about with a rich cloth of deep red, and there was a yellow silk handkerchief about her head.

"Oh, thanks!" Miss Severoid called sweetly from the bath-room doorway. "Put that green one over by the window, will you, please? Yes, near the veranda—a little nearer yet. That's it. That's a good girl. Thank you. I haven't seen you before. What is your name?"

"Ilora. I be new gell."

The girl eyed her mistress with a covetous yet contemptuous glance.

"Ilora? That's rather a pretty name. Take the other lamp into the bedroom, please."

The girl obeyed without a word, and a few moments later she went out with a sinuous, noiseless movement that was a little creepy.

Miss Severoid entered the bedroom and closed the door.

When she emerged again she was radiant, and more wonderful than ever. The soft lights played in her hair; her cheeks glowed, and her eyes sparkled with the love of life—and, possibly, with the knowledge that

she was truly beautiful. In a simple, white dinner-gown, free from all artificialities, she might have posed for a modern version of the Madonna.

At dinner that evening, the Rev. James Steel glanced furtively in her direction several times, and knew, though he never would have admitted it to his wife, that he was looking upon the most fascinating woman he had ever seen.

Mrs. Steel looked sad; not at all envious—just sad. She was thinking of what havoc malaria and its attendant evils would work upon Miss Severoid's wonderfully tinted cheeks and smooth, svelt figure.

Even the waiting maids seemed to feel the effect of Miss Severoid's startling loveliness. They performed their duties with less precision than usual, and the *punkah* boy twice stopped pulling to gape at the glistening whiteness of her shoulders.

"I can't understand what the people at home were thinking about," the missionary's wife said to him when they were seated in their corner of the veranda afterward.

Miss Severoid had smilingly wished them good-night because she felt "just a little sleepy."

"She was never intended for this kind of work, even if she does know how to teach, and I'm sure she doesn't care a snap of her pretty fingers whether there are a dozen heathens in the Delta or a million."

"Martha, my dear!"

"And you know it, James. And you don't care whether she does or not. You are glad to have her here, if only to look at and be reminded that a woman is really a delicate creation of the Lord's, and not the physical monstrosity you married."

"Martha!"

"Oh, fiddlesticks! And that note of horror you are

trying to get into your voice isn't convincing. But I don't blame you, man o' mine. If *I* were a man, I'd—what was that?" she exclaimed.

Mrs. Steel sat up straight and listened. She had good ears.

A naked foot scuffled through the dining-room and one of the maids passed on down-stairs to the beach. The watch-boy under the veranda stopped singing his three-lined dirge to the pale and watery moon and sang it to her, and forgot he was a watch-boy.

The maid's name was Ilora.

A bell from a distant beach sounded, rather prematurely, the hour of nine.

"Thought I heard some one moan," Mrs. Steel said at last, sitting comfortably back into her chair. "But I must have been mistaken."

Yet she had not been mistaken.

A half-stunned Kroo watch-boy lay under the fringe of the bush at the rear of the clearing—bound and gagged. A large and brutal-looking Jackrie was sitting on his head.

And Clavering was seated in a shadowy corner of Miss Severoid's sitting-room with a tiny handkerchief in his hand.

CHAPTER VII

TEARS

The green-shaded lamp near the veranda windows had been turned low, and a streak of light coming through the half-opened bedroom door fell like a spotlight upon Miss Severoid, who stood very still in the center of the room.

An indistinct and irregular drone of conversation came from the far corner of the south veranda which, being upon the other side of the house facing Perkins & Gray's, was not visible from Miss Severoid's quarters.

The stretch of veranda upon each side of the main stairway and facing the river was common property, used in the daytime by visiting natives of more or less repute. Just then it was deserted.

Miss Severoid did not look at all frightened. She was listening and—smiling. Then, apparently satisfied, she tiptoed to a chair.

"You are quite an accomplished climber," she said in a subdued voice, arranging her skirts carefully and picking up a fan. "How did you get past the watch-boys?"

Clavering's eyes glowed upon her like those of a cat in the dark. He crossed his knees leisurely.

"Usually," he answered, also in a carefully low tone, "I don't bother about watch-boys, but to-night I had to prowl and sneak my way here like a common thief be-

cause I realize that your position is a delicate one, and that the world would be most unkind in its judgment if it knew that I called. I suppose you've noticed how quickly the average mortal betrays the groove in which his mind runs by the speed with which he seizes upon the worst motive for anything that isn't quite according to Hoyle?"

"And this isn't quite according to Hoyle, is it?"—lazily stirring a tepid zephyr with the fan. "May I ask why you called?"

"To know why you dropped this."

He held up the tiny, lace-embroidered handkerchief in silent interrogation.

"Oh, just curiosity. This is a queer country, you know, and you are probably one of the queerest creations in it. Women, as a rule, have an abnormally developed bump of inquisitiveness. I am no exception, but"—with a careful laugh—"this proves it, doesn't it?"

Clavering's teeth gleamed in a smile. He held the handkerchief out to her.

"If that was all, then I do not want to keep this. But I should also like to know why, when you had such a splendid opportunity to destroy me the other evening, you allowed me to live to bother you?"

Miss Severoid claimed the handkerchief with a mild inconsequential "Thank you."

"That was simply gratitude for your goodness to us. Heaven knows when we should have reached home if you hadn't gallantly come to the rescue."

Clavering's lips closed tightly. It was then one saw the cruelty of his mouth. But he did not stir.

Followed an uncomfortable quiet. Miss Severoid appeared to be waiting for her guest to speak.

At length, with a low, melodious laugh, she said lightly:

"You are too serious, Mr. Clavering, or is it that you are not serious enough? I thought you came to improve my impression of you, and you are sulky. That isn't particularly entertaining. Why don't you tell me something about yourself?"

Clavering leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

"You are too pretty a woman to make trifling with any man very safe, and too clever a woman to let curiosity permit you to do anything so unorthodox and dangerous as this. What's the real reason?"

Miss Severoid smiled at him over the top of her fan.

"Flatterer! And though your theories are most profound, there isn't any particular reason for this except that I like to do unusual things. They are so much more exciting than the usual sort. For instance, the Tait boy was telling me of a very queer thing that I'd like to solve just for the fun of it. I hate mysteries, though I like to be mysterious, and this mystery irritated me—does yet, in fact. Imagine any one disappearing and never, never being found!"

Clavering sat up straight. His quick ear, constantly and instinctively listening for the approach of danger, heard a wicker chair on the south veranda creak loudly as some one rose and moved about for a moment.

Then a door closed, and silence, save for a low buzz of conversation under the veranda, fell again.

"Who disappeared and never was found?" he asked cautiously.

Miss Severoid folded her fan, leaned her chin upon it meditatively and thought a minute.

"Hed—no, that wasn't it. Deb—Debenham—that was the boy's name, wasn't it?"

"Oh—Debenham! Yes, I remember that. Happened about six months ago. And it irritates you, does it?"

"Terribly. That is, it seems so weird and stupid that no one seems to know even what happened to him. I mentioned it because I thought you, who are so mysterious yourself, might be able to solve it for me—if you cared to. I'm sure you could."

"Are you?"

"Quite."

Clavering's teeth gleamed again, and Miss Severoid saw his hands clench slowly on his knees.

"Good," he murmured, and his voice purred. "But I am not a detective."

"You could be if you wanted to. Please! Just tell me. You do know what happened to him, don't you?"

She rose very quietly, but Clavering did not know how she trembled. In a moment, with scarcely a sound, and hardly seeming to move, she was standing over him, nearer than he had believed she would dare to come.

"Won't you tell me?" she pleaded. "I'd just love the sensation of knowing something no one else does!"

Clavering did not answer.

His right hand rose a little with a jerky, undecided movement, and the tips of his fingers brushed the velvety softness of Miss Severoid's arm.

He did not feel her shrink, nor hear the little gasp she gave. Out of the shadows the deep blue of her eyes looked meltingly down upon him.

He moved uneasily and did not speak. But his right hand went out again, still undecidedly, and this time closed about her arm with a timidity entirely foreign to him.

Gently, without haste or any evidence of surprise or disapproval, she drew her arm free, still looking steadily down at him in the quiet, deliberate way she had.

"Please tell me," she pleaded again. "You do

know. I can see it in your face. He isn't—" Something caught in her throat making her voice husky. She coughed it clear. "He isn't—dead?"

Clavering sat back in his chair with a sudden and surprising air of nonchalance, as though the subject did not interest him. Miss Severoid winced.

"He wasn't dead when I saw him last," came the unexpected answer suddenly and indifferently—but Clavering's coal-black glance pierced the veil of shadow and saw Miss Severoid's lips part suddenly as though she would scream.

Instead she laughed; a queer little sound that cracked unmusically.

"Oh—tha-thank—you! Fun-funny I knew he—he—" she drew away a pace. "I was sure he—wh-where did you see him last?"

Clavering rose, and there was a quiet, knowing smile playing about the corners of his mouth. His movements were noiseless—catlike, uncanny.

A cargo boat, making the Bates & Mahler curve, blew a sonorous blast of warning, and then the world was still.

Miss Severoid backed away from Clavering till the light from the bedroom lamp fell upon her face again and betrayed the anxiety she was trying so desperately to conceal and stifle.

"So—that was it? I said you were a clever woman—and you are; as clever as you are wonderful. The stage lost an artist, Miss Severoid, when you became a mission lady. Might I ask—" and he suddenly reached her side, leaning over her like the shadow of evil he was—"what young Debenham was—to you?"

"To me!"

She tried to slip away, but the tips of his fingers pressing against her arm stayed her as effectively as though he had bound a rope about her.

"Don't be stupid! And—and please let me go! Please!"

She caught his eyes and held them. "You would not like me to think you common, would you?"

"Hardly, but I don't think you do in any case," came the easy, confident answer, and his fingers with tips like iron made her captivity more emphatic. "Besides, you think I can be of use to you—help you to find your—what *was* young Debenham to you?"

There was no answer.

But her head drooped slowly, nearer and nearer to his broad chest, while under his fingers he felt her tremble and shudder convulsively as a throaty sob broke harshly upon the stillness.

Clavering looked and felt awkward. Upon a plane with the majority of men he had a healthy horror of a woman's tears.

His hands dropped limply away from her arms, only to have her lean against him with her face cowering into the hollow of his shoulder, as though she were afraid he might leave her.

"D-don't ask me! P-please—you—you—"

She stopped. Her arms swept suddenly upward about his neck, and she clung to him in that sudden mad frenzy which no man enjoys, looking up into his face with all the faith in the world in her glistening, tear-filled eyes.

"You—you're so big and—and wonderful—so strong—so—so good to me! Won't you trust me? Oh, please, *please* help me! I—I'm so alone—so helpless in this terrible place, and he—he—oh, I can't! I *can't* tell you!"

"Sh!" Clavering cautioned, biting his lips. "It's —er—it's all right. I—I'll—"

He halted abruptly, and his eyes feasted themselves greedily upon her upturned face. The round arms

about his neck were a soft and delicious imprisonment.

Scarcely aware of it, his own crept up and about her shoulders—gently at first, then tightening all at once. His head bent with lightning swiftness, and his lips pressed burningly upon hers—once, twice, thrice—till she thrust him reeling away from her.

"You beast! You—you—"

Her indignation seemed to choke her, and her voice trailed away to a low moan. She tottered to a chair and buried her face in her arms.

Clavering stood a few paces off, motionless and white to the lips—listening.

Some one was calling for the watch-boy who lay under the fringe of the bush to the rear of the clearing, and a low, peculiar whistle came from beneath the veranda.

The outlaw, however, seemed to be more concerned about Miss Severoid's grief. His hands began to move uneasily, and his lips parted once or twice as though he would apologize.

But he waited—saying nothing.

Then Miss Severoid's head came up slowly, and he saw the glistening contempt in her eyes.

"Please—please *go!*" she breathed huskily. "I'm sorry I allowed you to come up. Instead of being a prince of sinners, you—you're just—just beastly! Now—go!"

Clavering's head sank an inch or two, and his shoulders with it. For a little while, with the whistle under the veranda becoming more and more insistent, he stood very still—just looking at her.

"I am sorry." His voice went fathoms deep. "Good night!"

"Good-by!"

Clavering, who had reached the door, swung round abruptly.

"No. Not good-by—good night!"

And he was gone—a silent shadow that drifted into the darkness and slipped across the beach, almost under the noses of those who were looking for the watch-boy.

Reaching the grove of palms leading to Marsden's Creek, he stopped and whistled—that same low sound that had come from beneath the veranda.

Ilora, who had playfully blown out the front beach watch-boy's lamp, grinned under cover of the darkness and helped him light it again. A few moments later she watched a "one woman" canoe glide out from the black shadows of Marsden's kernel house into the main stream and vanish in the murk toward Akerri.

Miss Severoid, brushing her lips vigorously with a tiny handkerchief, blew out the green-shaded lamp and laughed a little hysterically. She was looking across the creek to the shady corner of Marsden's veranda, where a big, sandy-haired man sat waiting and watching.

"It's all right," she whispered brokenly. "Everything's all right. He still has the shreds of a conscience, and he'll help me—and so will you. And—they were only stage-kisses—from the villain of the play. Ugh!"

Her mouth twisted queerly in disgust, and her step, as she moved toward the bedroom, was unsteady.

Then, reaching her bed and plunging recklessly through the loose-hanging mosquito curtains, she fell forward upon her face in a sudden, unrestrained paroxysm of weeping.

But those tears were real!

The others she had shed on Clavering's shoulder were not.

CHAPTER VIII

THE AFFAIR AT SAGANNA

THAT one of the mission watch-boys had been found bound and gagged, and that the victim could give no very definite account of what had happened to him, created a little stir. But comment upon the circumstance died away very quickly.

Chief Cralla did not appear on the Mission Beach next morning, and Mrs. Steel felt somewhat relieved.

But when another week had passed sweltering over their heads and the Beau Brummel of Jackriedom failed to put in an appearance, Miss Severoid began to look worried. In the privacy of her own rooms at night she would sit with her hands clasped tightly in her lap, staring dreamily, sometimes hungrily, out through the open windows, hoping for another of Clavering's notes.

In the afternoons, when the greasy, sycophantic children of the Delta had gone, or when she returned from a visit to some of the near-by villages, where, with Mrs. Steel, she distributed piece-cloth for the naked, administered home remedies to the sick, taught sewing and cleanliness, and, tempting men and maidens with the mysteries of the alphabet, invited all and sundry to the mission hall "next morning," she frequently took tiffin in the cool shade of her own veranda.

But before many days had gone she was rarely allowed to enjoy it alone.

Dawson, the district commissioner, broke the ice first, and most of the other men—Fletcher of Perkins

& Gray's, Carmichael of the Produce Association, Bailey of Bates & Mahler's, the assistant D. C., and the rest followed; and Miss Severoid served them tea and smiles promiscuously.

Once Davie Tait took himself by the scruff of the neck and, blushing most uncomfortably, thrust himself across the little wooden bridge—and the greater divide of being a raw "first-timer"—to the outer fringe of that admiring circle.

But he did it only once.

Hugging a veranda upright, watching men drink tea as though they liked it—men who usually drank their Scotch in tumblerfuls and neat—listening to their "idle chatter" and not having an opportunity to say anything himself, was not Davie's idea of enjoyment.

So he did not go again, in spite of Miss Severoid's smiling invitation.

McClure did not go at all. He sat across the creek and watched—smiling under cover of his mustache at the "other fools," knowing that he was probably the greatest fool of the lot.

Like Davie and Clavering, who had been led to expect more than they had received, McClure was sulking. He was resolutely waiting for Miss Severoid to ask him to call.

And Miss Severoid, for reasons of her own, had no intention of doing anything of the sort. Some day she *did* mean to call him to her side—but there would be nothing formal in the invitation.

Then one morning a runner brought to Segwanga the startling intelligence that Clavering was trapped in Chief Rama's compound in the native village of Saganna, fifteen miles away.

With Rama and his boys, armed with modern rifles and supplied with no one knew how many rounds of ammunition, he was fighting for his life against a par-

ticularly shrewd young lieutenant of the Waffs (West African Frontier Force), who, with a company of Yorubas, had apparently surrounded him and left him no loophole of escape.

That afternoon Miss Severoid took tiffin alone.

Most of Segwanga raced in launches to Saganna. The missionary and his wife, who went to help influence peace among natives who might possibly rise to Rama's aid, left their assistant behind because of the inviolable law that, at all times, upon all beaches, one white representative had to remain and, by the simple domination of color, prevent the native help from taking unusual liberties.

McClure did not go either. He sat in his shady corner as usual, watching the trim figure across the creek and wondered what she thought about it.

Had he been told that she was praying with all her soul for Clavering's escape he would have called his informant a fool.

Nevertheless she was. Clavering was too necessary to die just then.

Since morning she had writhed in doubt and suspense. Left at the mercy of such fears as were known to her alone, she grew paler and paler, till her color was near to that of gray chalk.

Then shortly after four o'clock, as if in keeping with her thoughts, the sky darkened suddenly.

African thunder clouds gathered with amazing rapidity and a sudden gust of wind whirled a doily from the little table. The few canoes on the river scurried for shelter.

She rose, called a maid as loudly as she could, and held her fingers to her ears as the first clap of thunder rent the sultry silence—the first great drop of rain splashed upon the veranda rail.

Reaching her sitting-room and hurriedly closing the

windows and doors, she sat in semi-darkness watching the forked flashes of nature's anger chase each other around the darkening line of the horizon, while peal upon crashing peal of thunder followed in rapid and deafening succession.

And then the rain came—a solid sheet of water, blotting out the river and Marsden's—everything beyond the veranda uprights; crowding her into still narrower compass with the vultures of her thoughts tearing at her heart in a gray-black world in which she was alone.

But there were no tears. Her pain went too deep for that. She sat quite still in a roomy Madeira chair, staring out at the gaunt veranda uprights that were stark against the gray wall of water beyond, too numb to be afraid.

Again and again her mind drifted toward Saganna, and a picture she had formed at the very birth of Clavering's plight rose up to torment her writhing soul.

It was a lurid scene, filled with flashes of fire and lazy puffs of smoke curling upward. The dark brown wall of the compound was pock-marked with bullet holes; blood and sweat-streaked faces came out of the blur of fight and still forms lay staring glassily heavenward!

The deadly outer circle was creeping nearer and nearer, and the vicious crack and spit of rifles was in her ears.

And in the midst of it all she saw Clavering—cool, easy, and even careless, gambling with his life and freedom, which were more valuable to her then than all the wealth in the world.

All at once, breaking in upon her sordid reverie with nerve-shaking suddenness, her sitting-room door, leading from the dining-room, was thrown open, and she started to her feet as a huge figure in a slouch hat,

black oilskin coat and rainboots, whirled in, closing the door swiftly behind him.

"Hope I don't intrude? Thought you might be frightened!"

It was McClure.

The sound of his deep bass voice, though not the sound she had hoped for, was welcome enough, and she made a desperate effort to show it as she told him to be quick about putting his dripping coat and boots into the bathroom, since the maids had evidently deserted their posts in the rain.

When he had obeyed, she told him, more hurriedly perhaps than was necessary, that she was more than glad to see him, and that he might smoke if he cared to.

"I'm all alone," she finished.

McClure's heavy eyebrows lowered, and he glanced searchingly at her from out of their shadow.

"Don't be afraid," he said soothingly, and the wicker chair he chose squeaked and creaked protest against his bulk. "These little rainstorms are harmless. A lot of fuss over nothing. But I thought since it was your first experience and you were alone I'd come over and—well—I'm here!"

"Thank you. It was very good of you. I hope you didn't get very wet?"

She rose and felt his shoulders and arms to convince herself, and McClure laughed oddly—a forced sound that would have jarred upon sensitive ears.

Miss Severoid scarcely heard it. Even as she made sure that McClure's raincoat had been perfect protection against the elements, her mind was groping through the darkness and the rain toward Saganna.

"You're not wet a bit," she said, going back to her chair. "But you really shouldn't have come. I wasn't afraid."

"No?" McClure wondered what had happened to

her voice—it was so small and husky. "Want me to light the lamp? We can hardly see each other."

"Oh, that doesn't matter. I mean—I'd rather not. I like this sort of end-of-the-world effect. Gracious—isn't it raining!"

"A little. Can't see the river—can you?"

"Not a thing. I never saw rain like this before. Does it last long?"

"Sometimes. But this won't last longer than an hour or two. It's too early in the season. The Saganna party will get wet enough, though."

"Ye-yes. I suppose so. I hope Mrs. Steel doesn't catch cold."

McClure laughed shortly. There was a heaviness in the atmosphere that was not the fault of the weather.

"Mr. Steel is more likely to be the victim," he declared.

With a supreme effort Miss Severoid smiled and tried to shake off the numbness and the sense of helplessness that were dragging like leaden weights upon her tongue and spirits.

But an awkward quiet settled over them, and the lashing of the rain, like dull thunder, upon the galvanized iron roof was not a soothing sound.

Remembering that he might smoke, McClure produced a cigar, but did not light it. He fidgeted about in his chair, searching his mind for something interesting—apart from the Saganna affair. That topic inevitably meant approaching the matter of the protection he had promised her, and he did not intend to refer to that again until she did.

"Perhaps—that is—perhaps I'm bothering you," he managed to say at last. "I think you'd rather be alone, wouldn't you?"

Miss Severoid started.

"Gracious! I—I'd forgotten you were here!"

"Thanks."

"No, no—I don't mean it that way! You—you are very good to me, and you don't bother me a bit. You came out in all that rain just because you thought I'd be afraid to be alone, and then you—well—you've no idea what a comfort it is sometimes to—to have some one near who can sit and say nothing, yet be there, strong and quiet and big, ready to help—if one needs help!"

McClure's color deepened a little, and Miss Severoid did not fail to notice it.

"I see. Do you need any help?"

"N-no—not quite. Please—that is—don't let's talk—about me particularly. I'm—oh, I'm out of sorts, that's all; the weather and—and everything— Tell me a story! You must know lots of them. Tell me about yourself—the things you've done and the places you've been. You look as if you'd been everywhere. Have you?"

"Almost." McClure smiled dryly. "And I've learned that the Golden Gate is not as far away from the Saltmarket as I am from knowing anything about you. I know you were a shepherdess once, and—"

"You know—" Miss Severoid got slowly to her feet and, choking back the rest of what she meant to say, moved away from him toward the windows.

Her face had become white and drawn in a moment, and her lips a knifelike line.

McClure sat very quiet, watching her.

"I'm sorry if I've hurt you," he said at last. "Perhaps I'd better go?"

No answer. She did not even turn her head.

McClure chewed his mustache, bit upon his unlit cigar, stared at his boots, out at the thick fog of the

rain, and at the back of Miss Severoid's dull gold head. He seemed to get very little satisfaction out of any of these things.

The silence grew heavier and heavier; a volcanic quiet that threatened to explode any moment. Even when the trader rose, to the accompaniment of much creaking and squeaking of his chair, the young woman's trimly rounded figure at the window, silhouetted against the gray light, remained perfectly motionless as though she had not heard.

McClure found his coat, hat and rainboots on tiptoe; slipped quietly into them and reached the side door leading out to the dining-room and the front veranda, not wishing to use Miss Severoid's private entrance because of the rain.

Still she did not move. All the vivacity had gone out of her face, leaving it dull and white and almost expressionless. But her teeth were set firmly together.

"I'll go out this way," McClure announced in a low tone. "Just send for me, if you need me. Good-by!"

Miss Severoid's chin jerked up a little and came round slowly. It was too dark to see her face clearly, and McClure only caught a flash of the perfect profile against the light.

But he never forgot it. It was like a cameo.

"Thank you. I'll remember that. Good-by!"

In another moment she was alone, listening to the pounding of his heavy feet passing through the dining-room to the front veranda and thence downstairs.

Then she turned and went slowly back to her chair.

She felt that she was suffocating, and presently she rose again to walk impatiently up and down the floor, clenching her teeth till the pressure hurt.

Ere many minutes had gone she had forgotten McClure—even his reference to the "shepherdess." Her

mind—numbed and weary with fear since morning—was staggering back to Rama's compound at Saganna.

She scarcely saw the storm drifting northward, and the canoes on the river, emerging from the shelter of the overhanging bush, were blurred specks before her eyes.

When her maid came to throw open the windows and the doors again the usual "Thank you!" was wanting.

And then, out of the mist and the blackness, a shuffling footstep on the front veranda came to her and made her start, stop and wait—ready to scream.

The step shuffled nearer and nearer. After what seemed an age the author of the sound came into view and stopped before her open door.

It was Cralla!

CHAPTER IX

THE SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

CRALLA'S helmet was in his hand, held out a little from his side toward Miss Severoid.

She took two hurried steps forward, then halted abruptly, gulping down the impulsive question she intended to put to him.

Inside the helmet was one of Clavering's carefully folded notes.

Cralla's face looked puffy, as though he had been indulging in some terrible orgy and had but recently awakened from its effects. His tawny skin, the color of dried mango-bark juice, had the splotched appearance common to the native after fever or debauch.

His expression was one of satisfied submission, as though he knew quite well that, even though a chief, he was nevertheless a very insignificant mortal in the eyes of the beautiful white lady whose soft, rich color was creeping back into her cheeks and lips even as he watched.

But the dignity of his crisp, gray head was still with him, and as he stood a few respectful paces off Miss Severoid did not know whether to fear or pity him.

A careful glance through the open windows and across the creek assured her that McClure was not in his accustomed corner, and another in other directions about her said it was quite safe to take the note from Cralla's helmet.

Holding her breath as she unfolded the epistle, which was much bulkier than those received on former occasions, this is what she read:

SPECIAL TO MISS SEVEROID!

(From Her Own Correspondent at the Front.)

Outside Rama's Compound, Saganna. Twentieth. Fierce battle raging. Am watching it from a box-seat. I have an uneasy suspicion that poor Rama and his crowd are being licked because a junior mechanic of warfare thinks I am somewhere in the midst of the black mob that is bottled up in the chief's mud palace.

Rama's boys have acquired Martini-Henrys, Lee-Metfords, and a Winchester or two—though I can't say where they got them—and are fighting for home and mother. Not because they particularly want to, but because those Yoruba soldier-men won't stop shooting.

Of course Rama's people have no right to have rifles.

That constitutes rebellion; but it's quite the most bloodthirsty scrap over a technicality that I have ever seen.

I don't know who told the lieutenant person that I was in Rama's compound, but I suspect that our mutual friend Cralla, through the medium of one of his satellites, is the culprit.

He doesn't like Rama. At any rate, I see that the wily chief from Akerri is very active among the Yoruba rear-guard, though he is careful to keep out of the way of bullets.

The Segwanga contingent is beginning to arrive; Dawson, Fletcher, Carmichael and the rest.

I see the *Violet* coming up now.

Glad you are not on board, because Sherman knew what he was talking about.

LATE EXTRA!

Fletcher, one of your most persistent tea-drinkers, is down. Hope it's only the shoulder, but it looks a little lower. Fletcher isn't a bad sort. Mrs. Steel is taking care of him.

Rama dropped an hour ago. His boys are just fighting. They don't understand.

Dawson, the D. C., will need a crutch to get to your tea-parties in future. Knee smashed.

I don't see your sandy-haired friend in the forefront of the battle, though. What's he doing? Sitting on his veranda sighing across the creek to you?

I am going to send Cralla along with this.

Since you are alone, ask him about young Debenham. He'll tell you all he knows, because I'll tell him to.

I think it is going to rain.

LATEST EXTRA!!

The compound wall has caved in and the Yorubas have charged. I think they wanted to get it over with and get in out of the wet. Rama's boys, or all that's left of them, are scooting all over the shop. The Yoruba is happiest when he's dropping his man on the run. It isn't pretty.

And now the lieutenant person is poking among the ugly little heaps in the compound searching for yours truly. Cralla is helping him.

Hope you haven't been worried about me?

Au revoir.

G. C.

Miss Severoid felt a little sick and her knees trembled. But they supported her as far as a chair. Cralla, still submissive and emotionless, remained in the doorway.

There were a few moments of quiet while Miss Severoid grappled with the colossal impudence, the irony, subtlety, and completeness of Clavering's "special from the front."

She did not ask herself any questions about the "box seat," though she imagined it might be a particularly leafy tree. Neither did she give much consideration to the reference to her "sandy-haired friend," except to wonder how Clavering came by all his information.

Her first sensation, because of the apparently useless "slaughter of the innocents," was one of repugnance that made her shrink from the unctuous, treacherous Jackrie chief as from a contagious and filthy disease. But as she sat down, breathing a little more deeply than usual and glancing rapidly about, she became calmer and colder and more deliberate.

Her fears departed as suddenly as they had come. Hope was born again, and with it a keener appreciation of Clavering's ability.

When a maid had scuffled through the dining-room into the hum of activity in the kitchen below Miss Severoid looked toward Cralla again.

There was no impudence or expectation in his look or attitude. He simply stood there waiting deferentially to be spoken to, without appearing to care whether Miss Severoid would do so or not.

"Mr.—Mr. Clavering tell you to tell me something?" She rose and went nearer to the door.

Cralla immediately descended upon one knee, said *"Doh!"* very respectfully, and, standing erect again, answered rapidly in a low monotone:

"Be so. I be chief! I no talk lie to white mammy. You savvy—Deb'nham?"

Miss Severoid nodded, with her attention fixed upon Cralla's face—his mouth and eyes particularly. They made her uneasy, though she was not at all sure why they did so.

"He live for Benin Cit'," Cralla droned hurriedly. "Be big money palaver. Last time I look him, he be all ri'. When he go leave Benin Cit' he hab more money than Niger Comp'ny."

Miss Severoid's lips came together and her color drifted again.

She had heard of the walled city of Benin and of its cruel, filthy inhabitants. Stories of the fabulous riches left there by expelled Portuguese adventurers in the fifteenth century were legion, but most of them were to be taken with several grains of salt.

Some one had told her, too, that no white man within recent times had ever entered the place and escaped alive.

"When and where did you see him last?" she asked calmly enough, in spite of another sinking weakness in her limbs.

"In Benin Cit'—one moon pass."

"How did he get in there? I thought—"

Cralla looked apologetic.

"He go dere all same he be—slave—for me."

"Your—"

A light step scuffling through one of the adjoining rooms halted her. She waited on the rack till it had passed on downstairs. Cralla's look of apology became more acute.

"—your—*slave?* You mean he dressed up as a native, blacked his face and body, and—and—"

Miss Severoid's voice died away as though the picture was beyond the power of words. Yet something very near to a smile hovered in the corners of her mouth, and there was a strange tenderness and pride in her eyes that Cralla did not understand.

He mumbled in Jackrie to himself, then translated it into pidgin English.

"He want to go so. No be my palaver if small-boy white man go crazy in him head. When Chief Daka of Benin Cit' done buy slave from me, suppose he buy Deb'nham! Be my palaver? Be dat way me an' Deb'nham bet. Deb'nham win. Palaver set."

Miss Severoid's cheeks assumed a deathlike hue. She took a lurching step forward, gripping Cralla's arm, scarcely knowing what she did. No story of Benin City was complete without mention of Daka, and she had heard of him, too; the most cruel, diabolical, blood-loving potentate that ever sent a slave writhing into eternity.

"You—you sold him to—*Daka!*"

It was just a breath, but Cralla involuntarily backed away from the sudden fire that leaped, like a dormant hell let loose, into her eyes. A Jackrie guttural of surprise escaped him.

"Be so we bet," he mumbled again sullenly. "If small-boy white man be fool—"

He shrugged his great shoulders significantly, and Miss Severoid suddenly jerked her hand free from his arm with something akin to loathing, though most of the gesture was simply an echo of the white anger in her face.

She retreated slowly to her chair, trying to think clearly. Oddly enough, the possibility that Cralla might not be telling the truth did not suggest itself at all.

The Jackrie looked about him cautiously, glinting through narrowed lids along the veranda, across Marsden's Creek, and out toward the river. Then, immobile and respectful as before, he stood patiently awaiting Miss Severoid's pleasure.

She was struggling to gain the mastery of herself and of the things she wanted to say. Questions were crowding her mind to the suffocation-point, and in place of the hopelessness of that morning there had come a gnawing anxiety that was plainly indicated by the manner in which she crushed Clavering's "report" in her hands, slowly tearing it to pieces.

Apparently she had forgotten even to be cautious and did not seem to care who came or went.

Another lurid picture was forming in her mind. It took a few minutes to get the first faint grasp of the situation and a few more to put her thoughts coherently into words.

Cralla waited. There was neither pity nor remorse nor covetousness in his face. It relaxed only when he spoke, and he emphasized what he had to say by a grimace or a shrug or a variety of gesticulations, simply because his vocabulary was inadequate.

"How—how could he mix with those other people

if he could not talk the language?" Miss Severoid essayed at last in whispering doubt.

"He no talk. Be all same he no get tongue. Daka like him so."

Miss Severoid blinked, swallowed once or twice, then persisted:

"Can't we buy him back?"

"Daka no sell."

"Why?"

"He neber sell slave. He buy all time." Cralla shrugged his shoulders again. "Daka slave die plen'y quick."

It was pure, uncivilized brutality, and Miss Severoid shrank from it as from the knout, clenching her teeth and closing her lips as though to keep from crying out. Quite involuntarily her glance traveled slowly in dumb appeal toward the shady corner of Marsden's veranda.

Cralla followed the direction of that look, and his eyes narrowed evilly in a manner that did not portend anything very pleasant for McClure. But when Miss Severoid's attention fell upon him again he was as respectful and submissive as usual.

She regarded him for a moment or two in silence, and again she had that uneasy sensation of distrust regarding his eyes and mouth.

Then she rose, not taking her eyes from his face for a moment.

Cralla retreated a step, then another, cringing. He did not seem to know what to make of the steely blue steadiness of Miss Severoid's gaze. Quite plainly it bothered—no, frightened and ruled him.

"Send Clavering to me—to-night." Her voice was as cold as her look and as unwavering. "I don't care where he is. Tell him he must be here—to-night!"

Cralla's lips moved as though he would protest, but

the words died in nameless, throaty sounds that seemed to hurt.

"Now—go!"

She might have spoken to a dog that way.

And Cralla, with an uneasy, sniveling look of bewilderment upon his face—robbed of his majesty for the moment—went rapidly.

CHAPTER X

AGIGI TAKES A HAND

THE Saganna party filtered back to Segwanga in irregular procession shortly after dark.

It was not a happy home-coming.

That Rama and his people had been practically wiped out; that a bubbling pot of rebellion had been snatched from the fire ere it had had a chance to boil over, was little satisfaction to the dusty, blood-smeared lieutenant of the "Waffs." He made up his casualty list and regarded a heap of contraband rifles which had undoubtedly been sold to the rebels by Clavering—who had vanished into thin air, leaving no trace behind.

Without doubt, Clavering had been in Rama's compound within the past twenty-four hours. When and how he had left it was just one more of the unsolved mysteries that made men liken him to a harmattan mist.

The only person to leave Rama's compound after the Yoruba circle had closed around it had been Chief Cralla of Akerri and a few of his boys, one of whom carried a harmless, necessary, black tarpaulin-covered carrier's pack.

They all promptly denied complicity in the threatened rebellion. Cralla himself particularly blasphemed against the machinations of Clavering, with whom he would have nothing to do. This attitude he emphasized by remaining of his own free will in the rear of

the Yoruba lines till the fight was over, chanting weird incantations to his favorite *juju* and praying for Clavering's annihilation.

But when he had satisfied himself that Clavering had escaped, he beat a hasty retreat from the scene, traveling to Segwanga under government protection in the little cabin of a supply-launch, with all the pomp of a prince of the blood.

The missionary and his wife did not return directly to the mission. They were too busy in the improvised hospital at the consulate, administering to the material and spiritual wants of those who needed them. They sent word to Miss Severoid to "hold the fort" a few hours longer, to which she replied that she would like to help if there were anything at all she could do for any one.

Apparently there was no one who needed her, so she sat out on her veranda, watching the river and—hoping.

Launches ran hither and thither incessantly. A cargo-steamer that had come up just before dark lay out in midstream, a silent, black hulk, guilty of no more illumination than the law demanded.

Vague shapes of canoes glided past, and there were others huddled in the shadow of Marsden's breakwater. A low drone of unusual activity swelled up and died into a murmur that rose again upon the least excuse.

The watch upon every beach had been doubled, partly against marauding sympathizers with the defunct Rama, and greatly because it was Clavering's habit, after a performance of the Saganna order, to follow it immediately with something peculiarly devilish, as though to get some satisfaction for the trouble to which he had been put.

Miss Severoid watched and waited patiently, with her eyes upon the corner of the veranda where Claver-

ing had made his appearance upon a previous occasion.

And then a diminutive, cherub-faced boy came, as it seemed, out of nowhere, and stood at her side, presenting a note.

It was Agigi, McClure's child-valet.

Suppressing an exclamation and an inquiry as to how he had come there, Miss Severoid rather blankly accepted the note and read it. while Agigi waited:

DEAR MISS SEVEROID:

I am at Perkins & Gray's, trying to get poor Fletcher to go to sleep. He was rather badly hit to-day—is now delirious—and am afraid he won't be quiet till he sees you.

If you'd care to come down I'll have one of Fletcher's assistants look after things for you while you are gone. Just say to the messenger that it is all right, and I'll send your relief and escort right over. Sincerely,

D. MCCLURE.

Miss Severoid's hand bearing the note descended into her lap and remained there several minutes while she tried to come to a decision. It was not easy.

Clavering might arrive any moment and—

She did not care to go beyond that.

Quite suddenly noticing Agigi again, she realized that he was waiting for an answer.

"I don't—I mean—that is—say I—say it's—all right."

Immediately she wanted to say it was impossible. But the boy was not there. He vanished around the corner of the veranda and down-stairs, a small, almost invisible slip of humanity which moved with a swift, soundless tread that was uncanny.

But in the black shadows of a water-tank he stopped, as a low, peculiar whistle struck upon his ears.

It came, it seemed, from the other side of the stairway. Almost at once the sinuous figure of Ilora appeared at the top of the stairs under the light of a lamp that hung from the veranda roof.

She came immediately down to the beach and headed in the general direction of the water-front, where two hurricane lanterns swung idly in the hands of the double watch.

Agigi, curious and invisible, waited to see what would happen. Because he was watching Ilora he did not see Clavering till that gentleman—whose bump of impudence, in the absence of the missionary and his wife, had made him dispense with the trouble of climbing—had almost reached the top of the stairs.

But Agigi saw him there for a second, just as he had seen Ilora—under the lamp.

The whites of the boy's eyes showed, and became still more prominent as Clavering turned and disappeared in the direction of Miss Severoid's quarters.

With the body of a child and the mind of a man, Agigi waited to hear a scream.

A minute passed—two—three.

There was no scream. No suspicious sound of any kind.

Agigi did not understand it at all. But he thought McClure might.

In a moment, yet very cautiously, he had slipped around the water-tank and was heading, like a spirit of the darkness, as swiftly as his little feet could carry him toward Perkins & Gray's.

Five minutes later, in the privacy of Fletcher's office-sitting-room, the boy was breathlessly whispering into McClure's ear:

"Dem new miss'n lady say be all ri', but dem time I lef' miss'n house, I loog Mass' Clav'rin' go up-stai'. He go for dem new miss'n lady room. I wait to hear her holler. But she no holler. All be sof'ly, sof'ly, all same catchee monkey."

McClure straightened.

There was a smoldering glow in his eyes—nothing

violent, but quiet—like death. A brighter flame of passion would have been less dangerous.

Without a word he turned and, reëntering Fletcher's bedroom, caught the eye of one of the wounded and delirious trader's assistants.

"I am going to fetch Miss Severoid myself," was all he said, and immediately went out, drawing his belt a little tighter.

When one has lived in the midst of mystery and the promise of sudden death for any length of time, one learns to walk quietly and to speak little. McClure, in spite of his bulk, made hardly any sound.

He was not even allowing himself to think.

Crossing Perkins & Gray's beach he dived silently and without a lamp-boy into the bush-path leading to the mission.

As a rule, the carrying of firearms was tabooed by the traders and government officials alike. It was considered to be one of the unmistakable signs of the "first-timer."

But not when Clavering was believed to be in the immediate vicinity. Then every man looked to the loading of his weapons and tested the steadiness of his right hand.

And McClure fondled the butt of the .45 he carried with an extremely keen satisfaction as he went very softly through the darkness toward the mission.

At the other end of the path he encountered the mission-house steward, whom he did not recognize in the darkness.

"Who's that?" he demanded in a voice that was harsh—almost brutal.

"I be miss'n stewa'd, sah. I go to Fletch' beach, sah. Miss Sev'roid done sen' me, sah."

McClure grabbed the boy's shoulder in a grip that hurt.

"Miss Severoid sent you? How? When?"

"Jus' dis minit, sah. She come into de dinin'-room, sah, an' tell me to say dat she no can come to Fletch' beach foh an hour."

McClure was silent, but his giant body stiffened till the tension pained. He was tempted in the first few moments to ram the implication in the boy's information back down his throat.

A dull, numbing heaviness came to him, then a flash of burning anger; and then he was quiet again—a quiet with an icy chill in it.

"Miss Severoid did not call you to her rooms? She came out into the dining-room and told you?"

"Yessah."

McClure's lips broke in a terrible smile.

"All right. Go back. I'll tell Mr. Fletcher."

The boy retraced his steps hurriedly, and McClure, watching him go, thanked Heaven for the regulation that did not allow native help to roam about any of the beaches after eight o'clock. They were compelled to remain indoors so that the watch-boys would have fewer people to watch. That was at least one benefit derived from the "curfew."

McClure saw the slow-moving light of one of the back-beach watch-boys passing the rear of the mission-hall, and waited till it came a little nearer. Then he went to meet it.

"McClure," he announced in a low voice when the boy was near enough. "I go beach-front."

"All ri', sah."

In a few moments the trader had slipped past the mission-hall and had reached the deeper shadows under the veranda.

Down near the water-front he saw two lights; one stationary, the other moving back and forth over a very limited beat, as though it did not care to get too

far from the other light. This revealed dimly the existence of a woman who seemed to be amusing herself with the affections of both watch-boys—making one jealous of the other.

McClure did not mind. In fact, just then he preferred the watch-boys' attention to be diverted, as it permitted him to reach the water-tank under Miss Severoid's veranda unchallenged and unobserved.

There was a white light burning in one of Miss Severoid's rooms. The green one was turned very low.

Crouching in the deep shadows of the water-tank, commanding the stairs and the stretch of the veranda-rail above but deprived of a full view of the water-front—McClure waited.

CHAPTER XI

INSTRUCTIONS

VERY much as Agigi had done, Clavering had appeared at Miss Severoid's side while she was looking the other way.

"You sent for me?"

She wheeled in her chair and faced him.

"Gra— Why! How—how did you—"

"By the stairs. They are easiest. Shall we talk here or go inside?"

Miss Severoid rose nervously and glanced toward the lights across Marsden's creek.

"You—I—that is—you can't wait. I have to go down to Perkins & Gray's to help put poor Mr. Fletcher to sleep. He's delirious, and—"

A throaty, derisive laugh interrupted her.

"You sent for me, I think. Which is more important? Fletcher's delirium or—young Debenham?"

"But—"

"Will Fletcher help you bring young Debenham back?"

"Oh, bu-but you don't understand! I said I'd go, and they are going to send some one for me and some one to keep house while I'm gone. So you see, you can't—"

"Find a maid and send word to Fletcher that you can't get down till later—say an hour. Any excuse will do. But why give any? Shall I call a maid for you, or will you do it yourself?"

Miss Severoid looked at him curiously. She was neither angry nor annoyed; just doubtful. But Clavering's very masterfulness and quick grasp of the situation of the moment were indications of the manner of man who could help her most.

"Which is it to be?" he persisted with impatience.

"Oh—I—" She paused a moment. "Very well; wait. I'll get a messenger, and—and perhaps you'd better go inside. You are too conspicuous out here."

She smiled to him over her shoulder as she went quickly toward the dining-room, and was gone little more than a minute. When she returned he was seated, as upon a previous visit, in the darkest corner of her sitting-room.

"I sent the steward," she told him simply, turning the green lamp low. Then, walking toward him, she halted a few paces away. "You know why I sent for you. Have you anything to say to me?"

Clavering leaned forward.

"You want young Debenham brought back?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Does that matter?"

"What is he to you?"

Miss Severoid's head drooped a little.

"Please don't ask me any questions. Just tell me if there's a chance to—"

"There *is* a chance—if you'll take it."

"Wh-what?"

Clavering leaned forward a little more.

"You must go for him."

"*I* must? How?"

"Because he won't come away otherwise. We could send Cralla to talk to him, but I'm afraid that would not do any good. He would probably not believe Cralla, and he says he won't leave that filthy place until

he gets what he went for. I never met any one who was so desperately in need of money—and he won't get it. The upshot of his particular form of madness will be—well, he'll die. But if you go for him—"

"But how can *I* go there? I thought—"

"Cralla will take you."

"*Cralla!*" Miss Severoid drew back, feeling rather chilly.

"Oh, Cralla isn't so bad," Clavering murmured gently. "Besides, it's your only chance. Of course, I can understand that the idea of traveling alone in Cralla's company isn't very proper or inviting. If you'd care for a white escort, why not ask one of your tea-drinkers to go along? Better still, your sandy-haired friend? He probably knows more about the country than any of the others."

The note of easy indifference, combined with the magnanimous advice that she have McClure accompany her, was baffling.

For a little while she made no reply.

Clavering sat back in his chair, crossing his knees with sublime nonchalance. It did not seem to matter to him whether she was prepared to accept his suggestion or not. In fact, he appeared to be absorbed in trying to locate the carpenter's beetle that was bumping its hard-shelled back against the walls in its blind efforts to escape from the room.

One of the watch-boys struck "two bells."

"How—how could we go?" Miss Severoid asked quite suddenly, and picked up a fan as though to give her nervous hands some employment.

"By canoe or launch part of the way, then on foot. It isn't very far."

"And how would we get into the place? You talk as if we had nothing to do but walk in and walk out again."

Clavering's teeth gleamed in a complacent smile. Uncrossing his legs leisurely, he rose.

Some one, wishing to cross the beach toward Perkins & Gray's, was calling for a lamp-boy.

Clavering listened a moment.

"That's Carmichael. Must be going down to see your friend Fletcher. Perhaps he thinks you are playing nurse.

"But about Benin City. Don't be afraid. It is very simple. Cralla will show you how, and I suggested McClure in case you were not prepared to trust the chief. Of course you had better not tell McClure what I have told you. If you did, I'm afraid he wouldn't go. He'd probably think you were insane."

"Bu-but that doesn't explain *anything!*" Miss Severoid exclaimed, putting aside the fan again as if it bothered her. "What are *you* going to do? I ask you to help me, and you suggest the names of other people. I—I thought you'd— Oh, please—don't be so mysterious! I can't make my mind solve riddles."

Clavering went a step nearer to her, his head a little upon one side—still listening.

"There is nothing to explain. You simply take a launch and provisions, go as far as you can by water, which is to Saloko, and then get out and walk. You'll go into Benin City, and you'll find Debenham waiting for you. Then you'll say to him: 'Come out of this, you idiot'—or something like that; and if you mean enough to him, he'll come. Then you'll get back to your launch and return here. Simple, isn't it?"

Miss Severoid studied him in the semi-darkness incredulously.

"I—I—how do I know you are speaking the truth?"

"Thanks."

"Well—it sounds ridiculous. It can't be so easy as that!"

"Nothing is easy if one doesn't know how. Cralla knows. He's a friend of Daka's, and of mine. If he fails you, I fail you. Do you think I would trust you in his hands if I were not sure of him?"

He laughed in soft deprecation of her fears, took another quick step nearer to her. Before she could escape he had wound his arms about her.

She gasped, struggled for a second or two, and then was still. This was the price she had expected to pay for Clavering's usefulness, and when his arms tightened and his lips brushed her forehead she did not move.

"You are a wonderful little woman," he whispered. "Wonderful and unafraid. But you hate me for this. You can't scream because you need me, and you won't fight because you think I might be annoyed and refuse to help you. That's it, isn't it?"

Miss Severoid swallowed. She did not like to have her motives read so plainly. Her lashes fell quickly, as though she were apologizing to herself for having made them so obvious.

"I—I'm afraid it isn't—altogether," she confessed haltingly, and tried to make him believe that she meant it. "You—you're so masterful—so big and—and you don't ask if you may. You just—"

Clavering kissed her again—on the lips this time—and his own were burning.

Miss Severoid shivered.

"Oh—please! We—we mustn't!" she gasped, and drew away from him a little. "It isn't right, and—and we've got so much to talk about. Please, just—"

She slipped out of his embrace gently, running her hands down his arms till she gripped his fingers, which she held in soft imprisonment, smiling wonderfully up at him, and pleading, too.

"Tell me why you can't go with me! You don't seem to be in this at all."

Clavering's glance became troubled. Quite evidently she puzzled him.

He stood very still and stiff, gazing steadily down at her.

"Then—you don't altogether—hate me?"

Miss Severoid laughed oddly—swayed toward him suddenly on tiptoe, kissed him, and slipped away again in a second, releasing his hands.

"There!"

She stood off at a safe distance, her eyes dancing in roguish glee.

"Now don't let's be foolish any more—just now. One would think neither of us had reached years of discretion. Tell me—what part are you going to play? I need you, and I know you can help me more than any one, and—and I want you to come with me."

"Why?" It was very deliberate.

"Oh—just—just because."

She saw his hands clench stiffly, and the line his mouth made frightened her a little.

"I am sorry, but I can't travel with you."

"Oh—why?"

"Just—because." A sardonic smile broke upon his lips. "But I shall always be near. Don't forget that. Cralla will know where to find me at any time in the night or day, and I'll be at your side in an hour should you need me."

Miss Severoid was doubtful again. A screeching siren on the river made her jump.

"You are so mysterious," she complained finally, and pouted deliciously. "And everything seems to be entrusted to that beast Cralla. He knows everything, and you won't tell me anything. How do you know he won't turn traitor some day?"

Clavering met her glance of childish inquiry very steadily.

"Cralla won't turn traitor," he said evenly. "There is no fear of that. And you must trust me to arrange to help you in my own way. Surely McClure is enough protection against any of Cralla's tricks.

"But"—with a deprecatory gesture—"that's settled. Persuade McClure to go with you and make your arrangements with Cralla. And the quicker you start the better chance you will have of arriving—in time."

Miss Severoid's shudder was perceptible. For a little while Clavering regarded her with uncomfortable directness.

All at once his chin rose sharply.

"Here comes the worthy missionary," he announced in a whisper. "He'll probably want to talk to you, so I'd better be off. Come."

He stretched forth his arms.

Miss Severoid did not move. She listened, and very faintly heard the sound of voices coming nearer.

Then she appeared suddenly to notice Clavering's waiting arms. Lightly drawing away, she smiled and shook her head.

"No. No more. Please go! I'm afraid they'll catch you."

Clavering's arms descended slowly, and the look he gave her seemed to penetrate to the back of her mind.

"Perhaps it is just as well. You'll need a few—to persuade McClure. He's a solid human. Good night."

He slipped past her like a shadow and was gone, leaving her to swallow his parting thrust as best she could.

Mr. and Mrs. Steel seemed to be very near. She heard them talking to a watch-boy—heard his repeated "Yessah—Yes'm—Yessah!" Standing directly

under the hanging lamp at the top of the stairs, she waited for them to come up.

There was no sign nor sound of Clavering.

Crouching in the shadows of the water-tank, McClure saw Miss Severoid quite plainly—her smile of welcome to the missionary and his wife and the coruscating lights in her hair. The muscles of his jaws stood out.

Then the watch-boy who had run to meet the missionary was ambling away toward the water-front, and a low, peculiar whistle came out of the blackness beyond the stairway.

Almost instantly a dark shape appeared on the veranda-rail above—came softly over, hung for a second, a splendid target—then dropped noiselessly upon the water-tank.

McClure, almost under the outlaw's feet, made no move to shoot; did not even reach for his revolver, which was in its holster. He waited till Clavering jumped lightly to the ground.

Then in an instant—swift, silent, and terrible—he rose, wound his left arm around the unsuspecting outlaw's neck, and with his right snatched at and secured his prisoner's revolver.

There was a harsh, unlovely oath, smothered at birth as McClure's forearm pressed violently across Clavering's throat, and the hard rim of his own revolver digging into his spine produced perfect peace.

"Quiet!" McClure growled, shifting his grip to Clavering's collar. "And don't attempt to be clever, or I shall be fatally unpleasant. We are going away from here without any fuss. March!"

CHAPTER XII

THE FIGHT

CLAVERING drew a long, deep breath—like a sigh.

He did not have to see McClure's face to know who his captor was. The sound of his voice had been enough, and Clavering had always had a sneaking respect for the big trader's prowess in several directions.

Under the circumstances that respect increased tenfold.

McClure could not be flustered or tricked. He could shoot, too—fast and straight. What was most important—he undoubtedly would!

Clavering knew that, and, having no wish to die indecently under Miss Severoid's windows—or anywhere else, for that matter—he silently obeyed the insistent command voiced by McClure's revolver.

They passed under Miss Severoid's windows, the murmur of voices coming from the missionary's quarters, and halted near the door of the deserted kitchen until one of the back-beach watch-boys had vanished under the awning of the mission hall.

Then they went forward again, crossing the space between the silent native quarters and the hall, and tried to slip into the palm-grove leading to Marsden's beach without being observed.

At least that was McClure's intention. Clavering had no choice.

But the watch-boy, not visible at first, called suddenly from under the awning:

"Who dat?"

"McClure," that gentleman returned in sonorous irritation, screening Clavering as best he could from the boy's peering inspection. "Be all right."

"All ri', sah!"

They went on into the grove of palms, too full of shadows to allow any one who wished to pass in a hurry to be easily recognized.

And the lissome figure of a woman followed them, slipping past the watch-boy like a black wraith while his back was turned, and, coming to a halt when his light came round again, hugged a palm so closely as to seem a part of it.

There was a heavy, unlit hurricane lantern in her hand.

"What's your program, Mac?" Clavering asked with cool and easy familiarity when they were out of the watch-boy's hearing. "This is all very mysterious. Why don't you shoot and make some one we both know desperately unhappy?"

McClure's teeth snapped audibly.

"Shooting's too good for you," he growled. "It's too quick. My mango-tree would be better."

"But that wouldn't be a pleasant sight for a lady. She'd see me hanging there, you know. Perhaps you are medieval enough to want her to?"

Again that dull, dangerous glow came into McClure's eyes. For a few moments he was very near to what his conscience would have called murder. In fact, his finger trembled so uncertainly upon the trigger that he drew it away in fear of what it might do.

"I'm giving you a chance," he said thickly, "to die like a man on my beach instead of—where I found you. Don't irritate me any more than you can help."

Clavering chuckled, quite as though he enjoyed the prospect.

"So that's your idea? Protecting the lady's fair name and so forth. Splendid! But what's your plan when we get across the creek?"

"You'll see," McClure answered grimly, and thrust his captive ahead of him over the little bridge.

Suddenly he stopped.

The flutter of loose cloth about swift-moving, naked ankles came from behind. The sound was unmistakable.

In an instant he swung Clavering around and looked back into the inky blackness of the avenue of palms.

But as far as he could see there was no one there. With a grunt of annoyance he went on again.

Almost immediately Ilora came out of hiding behind a tree, divesting herself of the long, telltale overcloth, which she swiftly folded about her like a belt. Then, more like a shadow than ever and as silent, gripping the hurricane lantern tightly, she reached the bridge and stopped.

McClure and Clavering had crossed it. A watch-boy, standing on Marsden's oil-wharf, was waiting to challenge them.

"Be all right, Dubla," McClure called before the boy came near enough to see clearly. "We no need lamp."

"All ri', sah!"

The boy shuffled off the wharf and ambled down to the breakwater.

McClure and his prisoner went on; past the oil-yard gate and the entrance to the warehouse; softly under the white assistants' windows and along the gravel path leading to the consulate—so far along that Clavering, tight-lipped now, and beginning to feel the indignity of his situation more than its danger, came to the conclusion that McClure intended turning him over to the district commissioner.

Then, suddenly swerving from that course, McClure

pushed him down a little beaten path that led across a large open space which faced the river, and which was facetiously called "the lawn" because it boasted an anemic sort of grass.

In the center of that space the dark outline of the powder-store loomed up. On the side farthest away from all other habitation McClure halted.

The place was unusually desolate and dark and admitted of uninterrupted quiet. Even the watch-boys rarely patrolled so far away from the oil-yard and the house, which were their principal cares.

Clavering did not know what to make of it, and frankly said so.

Turning him about, McClure dug the revolver into the center of his anatomy and declared very distinctly:

"Well—I'll tell you. I might have shot you like a dog any time within the past ten minutes and been thanked for doing it. I might have turned you over to the D. C. and watched you hang in the morning, or I might have thrown you to my Kroo-boys. And you know what they'd do."

Clavering knew well enough. Many Kroo watch-boys had suffered at his hands, and a Kroo-boy, given *carte blanche* to wreak his revenge, is very much like a terrier. He pulls his victim apart.

"Very considerate, I'm sure," Clavering murmured lazily; but his usual deprecatory smile was wanting, and he appeared to be sizing up his captor to arrive at the difference—if any—in their physical attainments. "But, since you haven't done any of those things, what *are* you going to do? Tie me to a few kegs of powder and light a slow fuse?"

McClure peered into his face.

"I am going to make you—fight!" he said slowly and tensely. "No guns—nothing but our bare hands—and when I've got all the satisfaction I want I'll let the

D. C. do the rest. But maybe I'll break your neck. I don't know yet. What do you say?"

Clavering winced, and his arms stiffened by his sides. McClure's confidence in himself was, to say the least, disconcerting.

"You are running this entertainment. When does it begin?"

For answer McClure drew his own revolver and tossed it from him in the direction of the powder-house. Then, still retaining Clavering's weapon, he rapidly searched him. Finding a serviceable clasp-knife, he threw it after the revolver.

"Now!"

In a moment McClure had cast Clavering's weapon aside—toward the river—and had wound an apelike arm about the outlaw's waist, throwing the other arm across his throat.

Slippery as an eel, all bone and sinew, with muscles like steel wires, Clavering tried to wriggle free, confident that he could easily do so, and mentally chuckling at McClure's conceit and folly.

But the chuckle died away into a quiet amazement.

He strained and tugged and leaped into the trader; twisted his right leg about McClure's left and attempted to affect his balance that way.

And McClure, rigid as a rock, laughed at him.

"Try some other trick, you whelp! There's your chance."

The trader's imprisoned leg freed itself in a moment, and in turn was twisted with startling swiftness about Clavering's. A lurching heave of his massive shoulders—a sudden jerking free of the apelike arm, and Clavering toppled backward, clawed the air, and struck mother earth with a jarring shock.

McClure stood over him—grinning. It was not a pleasant grin. He was breathing easily.

"Get up, man! I'm not half through with you."

Clavering's color was gray-white, and his cruel mouth a wisp-like line that twisted in a terrible fury.

But even then, creeping warily to his feet, he knew that, big and broad and powerful as he was, he was not the equal of his bigger and broader and more powerful antagonist at close quarters. The suddenness and ease with which he had been thrown, even though it might not happen so suddenly and easily a second time, had told him that his opponent demanded a cautious respect.

As he rose again it was with the intention of avoiding the embrace of McClure's arms.

The trader stepped back a pace accommodatingly, with a sneer in his very movement.

"You're a poor wrestler, Clavering," he taunted. "I could break your neck very easily. Come a wee bit nearer, man, and I'll—"

A whiplike right halted the banter.

McClure stopped it with his shoulder, and his elbow got in the way of a curving left that followed.

He grunted contentedly, lowered his head a little, and a vicious smash plunged through Clavering's guard and opened a nasty cut over his left eye.

Then the fight was on in earnest; a battle of giants, a grisly, spectral business in a darkness that was like a shroud. The deep breaths they drew, the dull, sickening impact of their heavy fists, and the scuffling movement of their feet were the only sounds they made.

A distant watch-boy patrolled his beat in sublime ignorance of the conflict, and a small launch, not very far from the river-bank, sputtered fussily past on its way to the consulate.

McClure, the bigger and stronger, was breathing just a little deeper; but the dull glow in his eyes had grown brighter.

His mind was whispering exultantly that whenever he chose he could close in upon Clavering—and possibly break his neck, after all.

He felt sure he could do it. There was a queer and somewhat hideous satisfaction in the thought that he could please himself in the matter.

Clavering, much faster and untiring, agile as a cat, with arms that shot out like the tongue of a snake, circled warily, yet fought as never before.

He had to; and freedom was not the thought uppermost in his mind.

That McClure had had him at his mercy—that he had brought him there, out of reach and sight of every one, and had thrown away all means of defense—that he had threatened to "break his neck," and seemed likely to be able to do it, were truths and possibilities that cut into the quick of Clavering's pride.

And as the warm trickle from the cut over his eye threatened to impair his sight, his command over his passions drifted away. The man beneath showed through; a snakelike man, savage, tricky, with a hell-born hate burning fiercely in his eyes.

Faster and faster he fought. Presently there was an ugly gash over McClure's cheek-bone and a swelling on his forehead that would possibly be bluish-green in the morning. McClure was bleeding copiously from nose and mouth. Even when he got home again to Clavering's already troubled eye the outlaw's speed and fury seemed only to increase.

Darting in and out, pounding McClure's body as though it were a drum, gliding out of reach of his smashing rights, and ducking under hooks that might have jarred his head from his shoulders—and always evading every effort the trader made to close in upon him, Clavering finally drove a straight left—flush upon McClure's mouth.

He snorted in his pain like a wounded bull—a terrifying sound; hunched his shoulders a little higher, feinted, took a slanting blow on the side of the head purposely, and lunging forward with all his weight behind the blow, took Clavering full between the eyes, hurling him back upon his heels.

For just such a chance had he been waiting.

Instantly, before the outlaw could recover his balance, McClure leaped at him and drew him into a bear-like embrace that promised to crack his ribs.

The earth slipped away from under Clavering's feet. He struggled furiously, but felt himself being lifted slowly up—higher and higher—as though his twisting, writhing weight were of no consequence.

Then, just as he managed to free one arm and make a frantic grab for McClure's bull throat, he was suddenly twisted over with a painful wrench and the trader's solid right knee pressed into the small of his back.

He was helpless as a child, not because he could not move, but because he was afraid to. One arm was pinioned and the other practically useless, because McClure's hard right forearm was under his chin, forcing his head back, and still back—with horrible and deliberate slowness—

The fear of death was on Clavering's face.

"Will I do it?" McClure taunted, his voice thick and hoarse with a passion that was not far from insanity. "Will I, or will you hang? Man, but you're a sore disappointment. I thought you were a fighter!"

Clavering's head went back just a little farther.

There was blood upon his lips and an icy perspiration on his forehead. His eyes were glassy.

McClure peered down at him and laughed.

"Huh! That frightens you, does it? I thought it would. That's why I'm doing it."

He moved Clavering's hapless head about—an inch or two—so that his face was turned toward the river.

"Take a look at it. It's maybe your last. That's Fletcher's launch you see, saving Carmichael the trouble of walking, and that's the *Vampire's* siren you hear coming round the Saganna bend with some more of Rama's whelps.

"All that fuss over you, too! You, who are lying so quiet across my knee, without a thing to say for yourself or all the devilment you've—"

Something black and fearsome rose out of the earth behind him.

A slight squeaking sound was all he heard, and then a heavy, round thing crashed down upon his head.

"Och!"

The Scotch in McClure was responsible for that. He lurched sidewise, and Clavering slipped from his hands to the ground.

Before the trader could turn the thing struck again and again. Accompanying the blows was a vicious hissing that ended in a satisfied "Ah-h-h-h-h!" as he sagged down in a motionless heap.

Ilora, heavy hurricane lantern in hand, stood over him, waiting to see him move.

Water dripped from her scanty clothing as a result of swimming the creek. Having crawled like a snake through the grass for about fifty yards, she was very dirty and savage-looking indeed.

McClure did not move.

The girl glanced quickly toward Clavering, as though she wondered why he did not immediately rise.

But Clavering could not.

He had—fainted!

CHAPTER XIII

NO ANSWER

CLAVERING was not a coward; neither had he a weak stomach. Battle and bullets held no terrors for him. He had played with death so long and had faced it in so many guises that the pastime had become almost monotonous.

But he had never lain across another man's knee, feeling his vertebræ snapping like a rotten stick.

That was both an undignified and a terrible way to die.

Ilora bent over him and shook him, muttering harshly in Jackrie the while. There was a new look of disappointment upon her face.

For a few minutes, lying flat and close to the ground, she had watched the fight. Though she did not presume to understand McClure's queer methods—considering that he might have shot his captive out of hand—she did realize that he had fought Clavering upon equal terms and—had beaten him!

Which, to her, was as astounding as though the Niger had run dry.

It took a little time for the amazing truth to be even faintly appreciated. When Clavering stirred and staggered to his feet she shuffled away a few steps, sullen and silent, allowing him to get an understanding of things by himself.

And presently, though unpleasantly conscious of a sickening sensation that his head would wabble from

his shoulders at any moment, he became acquainted with the whole situation.

Grunting a string of Jackrie gutturals and a few thick words in English at the silent Ilora in commendation for her timely assistance, he stood over the unmoving McClure and tried to smile.

But the effort was not a success. It was rather sheepish—as though he appreciated thoroughly the fact that it was no fault of his that their positions were not reversed.

McClure was lying on his face. Clavering stooped, and rolling him over on his back, felt for and found the faint beating of his heart.

He straightened. His smile had faded and his mouth was twisting queerly as he shrugged his shoulders significantly in the face of the fate that, once more, had been kind to him.

Then, turning sharply upon Ilora, he told her to look for his revolver, and indicated the general direction in which McClure had thrown it.

But the girl's obedience was not so swift nor so willing as usual. She shuffled toward the water's edge, muttering.

Clavering paid no attention to her surliness; it did not interest him enough. He looked about him—at the distant watch-boy's light moving lazily past a clump of cactus near the boat wharf; at the river to see the transport department's launch *Vampire* steaming into the consulate wharf with "some more of Rama's whelps."

Then he glanced behind him through the gloom toward the gravel path, and along it in the direction of the house and the breakwater, under the shadow of which his canoe was moored.

A single light still burned in the white assistant's living quarters. That was in Davie Tait's room, and

the young man was perspiring freely over the expense account for the month, preparing it for the homeward mail the following day.

There was no one in sight save the watch-boys, and watch-boys had never disturbed Clavering very much.

With an eye upon McClure, he turned and spent a leisurely few minutes searching for the trader's revolver, but gave it up when Ilora, without comment of any sort, brought him his own.

McClure stirred and moaned.

Clavering thrust the revolver into its holster, went to the trader's side, and peered down at him. Ilora followed.

"He go die?" she asked sullenly.

"Not yet. Some day. *Wah!*"

A faint, malicious sneer played upon his lips, and gripping Ilora's arm, he pulled her away.

She followed sulkily, still carrying the mission watch-boy's lamp.

But once she looked back. There was an undecided, savage sort of pity in her eyes.

Some time later, having no opinions of any kind upon anything save that his head was unusually heavy and painful, and that he would be all right if he did not have to walk, McClure staggered past one of his own astonished watch-boys and, somehow or other, crawled up endless stairs and lurched heavily along the veranda to his rooms.

Clavering was on his way to Akerri by that time, and Ilora was lying upon her mat in the mud-hut behind the mission, wide awake and—thinking.

Later still, McClure's "chief steward" found him huddled in his chair in his office, his face showing decided signs of conflict, his shirt spattered with blood

about the shoulders—a nasty mess. Immediately he called Davie Tait, and together they roused McClure from his semi-conscious state; at the same time sending for the doctor at the consulate.

McClure did not know that until afterward, when he said things to his junior assistant that would not look well in print. But the doctor declared that it was a nasty fracture, and asked his patient how the devil he had come by it and the marks upon his face.

Which was a question McClure did not wish any one to put to him.

He said he didn't know much about it. His statement was:

"I took a walk down by the powder-house and some one came up from behind and clumped me over the head. They must have banged me about the face when I was out, because I don't remember anything about that part of the performance. Wonder if my powder-store has been looted?"

Then, when everybody had gone, he sent for Agigi, who had returned from Perkins & Gray's post-haste.

The boy came in, a little sleepy, but as cherubic as ever, and studied McClure's bandages without emotion.

"You 'member what you told me about—bad white man?"

"Yessah."

"You tell 'nother man?"

"No, sah."

"Then don't, or I'll cook you all same chicken, or make monkey *juju* man bring back your tail! Savvy?"

Agigi winced. He did not like to be reminded of the possibility that he had, once upon a time, worn a tail.

"Yessah. I no tell no man, sah."

"All right. Morning time come, you go for far side of powder-store and find two small gun and one small knife. Hide them in your cloth and bring them to me. Savvy?"

"Yessah."

"All right. You savvy Dubla, the watch-boy for bridge side?"

"Yessah."

"Then ask him sof'ly—sof'ly which man come with me from mission beach."

"Yessah."

Agigi departed, and very shortly afterward returned with the information that Dubla, the watch-boy, thought McClure's companion had been a "gov'ment man."

McClure smiled dryly.

"All right. That's all. Don't forget two small gun and one small knife on far side of powder-house. May be just one gun. Bring what you find. Good night."

"'Night, sah."

The boy went out very quietly. In the silence that followed, McClure could almost hear his head throb. It was a sweltering night, too, and sleep would not come to his eyes.

His thoughts were not pleasant companions.

For a long time he lay in the smothering heat, wondering who had so miraculously come to Clavering's assistance. Then, realizing the futility of guesswork, he dismissed the matter and allowed his mind to travel across the creek again.

Which made him writhe and chew his mustache viciously, and toss restlessly about till he finally rose and sought the veranda.

It was a little cooler there, but not very much, and his throat was ready to crack. "Four bells" struck and told him it was 2 A. M. He could see dim shapes

of produce-laden canoes gathering near the breakwater to be ready for business with the rising of the sun.

Across the creek was darkness. She was asleep.

McClure leaned against a veranda upright for a while, trying to forget the throb-throbbing of his head and to shake off the dull, numbing heaviness that was creeping over him.

Then, very deliberately, he entered his office. Because his eyes were accustomed to the darkness, he readily found his keys.

Going directly to the drawer of his library-table, he opened it and produced the photograph of a shepherdess.

He tore it into many pieces and threw the fragments into his waste-paper basket.

After that he went to bed again—and lay in a Hades of his own till the sun came.

Then, because nature took a hand upon her own account, he slept.

Miss Severoid, looking anxiously, missed him from his accustomed chair that day.

The previous evening, shortly after the missionary and his wife returned, she had gone down to Perkins & Gray's, accompanied by Mr. Steel, and had soothed the delirious Fletcher to sleep so effectively that the missionary had marveled at it and came very near to the sin of envy.

Expecting to find McClure at Perkins & Gray's, and being told by one of Fletcher's assistants that "Mr. McClure said he was going to call for you," she was naturally curious and a little anxious to know why he had not done so.

Finding him absent from his usual corner on the morning after, her curiosity increased.

Then at luncheon the missionary said newsily:

"The doctor was telling me this morning that Mr. McClure was the victim of a queer assault last night. Some one clubbed him on the head when he was down near his powder store, and the doctor said the fracture was a nasty one. Some of Rama's rovers, I fancy, though nothing seems to have been stolen."

Miss Severoid said "Really!" in a blank sort of way, and for the remainder of the meal was rather quiet and taciturn.

A little later, in spite of the sizzling noonday heat that drove men under cover to lie groaning and sweating through two or three hours of unhappy idleness; in spite of a premonition that she was very foolish and was probably making a mountain out of a molehill, she sat at her little writing-table and struggled with a note that would not write. At least, not the way she wanted it to.

She was very anxious—impatient, in fact—to know just how badly McClure had been hurt; whether, like "poor Mr. Fletcher," he would have to be invalided home—a circumstance that would interfere with her plans considerably. And she wanted to call upon him in the cool of the afternoon to say how sorry she was, and to gather, if she could, the full and complete account of the "assault."

But for some inexplicable reason she found it very difficult to express her sympathy without being more formal than she wished to be, or more sisterly than she cared to be—in a letter.

Talking to McClure, with only him to hear, was one thing; putting words down in black and white was quite another. It surprised her to find herself being impelled to use expressions of a decidedly softening character that were not compatible with so short an acquaintance.

However, she finally managed this:

DEAR MR. MCCLURE:

I have just heard of your misfortune. If I may, I shall call after four to see that you are being properly treated. I hope it isn't as serious as I am led to believe.

Gratefully and sincerely yours,

ELIZABETH SEVEROID.

Placing it in an envelope, which she sealed and addressed simply to "Mr. McClure," she rose from the table and, as was her custom, sought a canvas deck-chair which she preferred to any other. In it she lolled through what was left of the lazy hours of the day, dreamily gazing out upon the sun-scorched world, watching the misty, fever-laden haze rise from the swamps across the river.

It was too warm to expend even the exertion of using a fan.

The decks of a "gin-tank" in mid-stream were deserted, save for a black Liberian boatswain and one or two of his boys, who dozed in the shadows of a deck-house.

A solitary canoe crawled past on its way to an up-river market. The stark, motionless forms of natives sleeping under the awning of Marsden's kernel house reminded Miss Severoid unpleasantly of death.

Down near the water-front the golden yellow clay baked and cracked in Heaven knew how many degrees Fahrenheit. A smothering, gasping silence hung over all the earth.

There were two hours of that. Then the ringing of bells upon every beach, save those of the mission and the consulate, called the enforced idlers from their restless, unhealthy slumbers, back to material things again.

The white assistants at the trading stations, pale and sunken-eyed, some of them gray like a washed-out rag, dragged their fevered, perspiring bodies on leaden feet back to work, each day finding it just a little harder.

Some of those assistants, endowed with wisdom, complete their first term of two years, and reaching home again—stay there.

The others?

Some of them have been known to live through three "contracts"—six years.

It is a short life—without mirth.

Miss Severoid saw Davie Tait reopen the kernel store, and rising, went to the dining-room door and called a maid.

The chief steward, who was enjoying a siesta in a cubby-hole of a place in the rear, roused himself lazily and answered, and Miss Severoid gave him the note to McClure with positive instructions to have it delivered immediately.

"Wait for answer," she added as an afterthought.

"Yes'm. I busy, m'm. I sen' gell, m'm?"

"All right."

The steward went back to the "galley," encountered Ilora in the doorway, and constituted her his messenger.

"Foh Massa MaClu," he said briefly. "M'm Sev'-roi' say wait foh ansah. Savvy?"

Ilora took the note and grinned.

The steward, unfortunately, mistook the meaning of that grin. In the succeeding minute he was nursing the thumb of his right hand which Ilora's outraged dignity had made her bite upon, with the instincts of her cannibalistic great grandparents in the deed.

Then, clutching Miss Severoid's note, she fled straight to McClure; or rather, to Agigi, who stood between.

Agigi took the note and told her to wait. But she followed him and halted in the doorway of McClure's office as the trader, with his head swathed in bandages and garbed in a light-weight dressing-gown and slippers, came from his bedroom.

Agigi gave him the note and he read it, hesitating a little upon the name "Elizabeth." Then he looked from under his lowering eyebrows at Ilora, who fidgeted and scuffled her feet.

"You be maid at mission beach?" McClure asked thickly, while Agigi, with a scowling glance at the girl, went leisurely back to his post.

"Yessah."

"You be Warri girl?"

Ilora acknowledged the compliment by grinning. Warri girls were the belles of the Delta.

"Yessah."

"Umph!"

McClure looked out through the open windows for fully a minute, and his great hands crushed Miss Severoid's note unmercifully.

Ilora watched. Ignorant and savage as she was, she was first of all a woman, and she knew where McClure had captured Clavering the previous evening.

The muscles of his jaw bulged prominently.

"There is no answer," he said, and turning abruptly, went back into his bedroom, sharply closing the door behind him.

Ilora did not move for a moment or two. There was a dull, phlegmatic look upon her face.

Then, muttering something in Jackrie that did not sound pretty, she shrugged her shiny black shoulders and scuffled away, spreading her face in an unholy grin.

Her mutterings, translated, ran:

"When a Jackrie woman loves two men at the same time, one of the three always dies. Usually the woman."

That was why she grinned.

She did not like Miss Severoid very much.

CHAPTER XIV

ARRANGEMENTS

Upon receiving McClure's negative reply to her note, Miss Severoid did not fly into a rage nor wipe McClure's name from the slate of her memory. She bit upon her amazement and chagrin, and swallowing them with considerable difficulty, tried to understand.

Then she remembered that McClure had said to Fletcher's assistant that he would call for her, and the vague possibility that he knew of Clavering's visit became a disturbing probability! It was the only thing she could think of that could possibly account for his startling change of front.

But she did not call upon him that afternoon to try to explain, or to receive an explanation. Nor did she call any afternoon, nor any time.

That was not her way.

He would come to her when she wanted him.

However, several suns rode scorchingly over Segwanga's galvanized roofs; tornadoes came and torrential rains descended, making the swamps more swampy; and several other little things happened before Miss Severoid—but that comes later.

Fletcher went home, babbling eternal devotion to two blue eyes and a crown of dull gold hair; and forgot about them when he reached Las Palmas. There a dark, Spanish beauty deprived him of his senses and his ready cash and left him to the mercy of untipped stewards.

Dawson, the district commissioner, whose knee had

stopped a rebel bullet, also departed, telling Miss Severoid that he was "Awf'ly sorry to go," and that he would be "jolly glad" if she would call on his people in Kensington when she got back to London.

"They'd be wild to know you, since you've been so good to me."

And Miss Severoid smiled queerly and said in a far-away voice that it would be a pleasure. When he had gone she tore up the address he had given her.

Clavering was silent, and Cralla remained away as the days dragged their torrid length to a close, until Miss Severoid became anxious again, even to the point of showing it.

But McClure's face healed, and his head was released from the smother of bandages in time to allow him to attend the funeral of his senior assistant, who contracted blackwater fever at three o'clock one afternoon and was buried at seven that evening.

The corners of Davie Tait's mouth were bluish-white that night. He made only a pretense of eating dinner. McClure, who understood, paid a visit to the young man's room afterward and found him huddled in a chair, gazing fearfully out toward the cemetery and fingering the butt of his ever-ready revolver as though he loved it.

"Funkitis" is sometimes as dangerous as other more scientifically determined maladies that are pronounced to have fatal results. McClure did not speak at first; just strode over, collared the weapon, and pulled Davie to his feet.

The boy whined and shrank from him.

"I'd like to go over the outstanding kernel checks with you, Mr. Tait," McClure said mildly. "I think some of them must have been paid, and we must have forgotten to mark them off. Any trouble with Balli this morning?"

Balli was a Sobo trader and Davie's pet aversion.

He swallowed and stood a little straighter. His teeth stopped chattering, and he was palpably ashamed.

"N-no," he admitted throatily. "He knows better than to monkey with me. B-but I had to boot one of his boys for trying to sell me the same bushel twice."

McClure gripped his arm and turned him toward the door.

"Yes? How was that?"

And Davie, gathering voice and steadiness and a healthy volubility, went on to explain the circumstances of the attempted theft; while McClure, listening very attentively to the recital of a time-worn trick, led his gradually quieting assistant along to his own quarters, where he made him work and sweat the fear of death out of his system.

Later, when Davie had returned to his room and had fallen into a comparatively restful sleep, McClure tiptoed in to "have a look at him," and stood for a little while watching him breathe.

"Umph! Sleep with your mouth open, eh? Perhaps I'd better send you home before the rains become real devilish, or I may have another of these damned letters to write."

He stooped and gently wiped the perspiration from the boy's forehead. Then he returned to his office and reluctantly began upon a letter to the deceased assistant's mother, glancing sullenly and disturbedly across the creek now and then. He wondered why Miss Severoid stayed up so late.

Both her green and white shaded lamps were burning brightly.

Just then, however, Miss Severoid was not even at home. But she was rapidly getting there.

Seated in a shell-like canoe, hoping the thing would not capsize, and watching the easy, steady sweep of

Ilora's paddle, she was wondering if the girl could really be trusted.

In a note she had received from Clavering that morning—a note she found on her writing table after breakfast—he had said that Ilora was one of Cralla's girls. It would be perfectly safe, he wrote, to meet Cralla and himself that evening at the mouth of the Akerri Creek, which was immediately below Bates & Mahler's beach.

The object was to make definite plans with the chief of Akerri for the proposed journey to Benin City.

Naturally, Miss Severoid had hesitated at first and had battled in a state of indecision all day. In spite of Clavering's assurance, she did not trust Ilora enough to be comfortable; and that the girl was in Cralla's employ, and had been at the mission as a maid for several weeks, was a disturbing thought.

It made her angry at first, then coldly deliberate and very careful; so careful that there was a revolver in her hand-bag.

But it was the death of McClure's senior assistant that decided her, because it appalled.

The swiftness of it was staggering. In the grip of a great fear that seized her, she ridiculed her puny misgivings, became determined—desperate, in fact. She was now returning home feeling that it hadn't been such a desperate business after all, even though Clavering was not there and she had been compelled to interview the chief alone.

Ilora had piloted her past the watch-boys in a manner providing a lesson in stealth that made her feel rather creepy and afraid, but she had emulated the Jackrie girl's methods with an aptitude that was startling even to herself.

And then they had sped swiftly down-river through an opaque darkness to the rendezvous.

Finding Chief Cralla alone, Miss Severoid had produced her revolver with such haste and directness that Cralla almost capsized his own canoe and Ilora's in his anxiety to get away.

Ilora simply shrugged her shoulders and wound her arms about her knees; but Cralla, muttering in Jackrie and leaning over the gunwale of his canoe, gripped that of Ilora's as though he were afraid to hold on, yet disinclined to let go.

"Where is he?" Miss Severoid demanded, trembling like a leaf, yet keeping the revolver pointed to Cralla's broad chest. "Why isn't he here?"

"He—he no can come," the chief sputtered desperately, and seemed to be trying to appreciate the fact that he was being discomfited by a woman. "He say he sorry he no fit to come. I talk true. Lie be so-so small-boy talk. I be chief! I be big man for my country! My mouf talk true word all time!"

"Oh—rubbish!" Miss Severoid was more angry than afraid now. "What did Mr. Clavering tell you to say to me? When are we to go, and how? What plans have you made—or have you made any?"

Cralla recoiled from the storm of questions almost as much as he did from the revolver, and his respect for the beautiful but terrible white lady apparently increased. He sniveled.

And to the last moment of that strange meeting, with fireflies flickering, and the constant buzz and hum of queer insects in her ears—with other canoes passing the pitlike mouth of the creek like fantoms, the dip and swish of their paddles sounding not unlike the rustle of a shroud—Miss Severoid dominated the proceedings entirely and arrived at an understanding of what was expected of her in a very definite manner.

The possibility of immediate danger became a negligible quantity with each passing minute. Though

she could not see Cralla's face very well, she judged by his manner of disclosing his plans of the trip that they had been well thought out, and that he was comparatively sincere in his intentions and was willing to give her the benefit of his services ungrudgingly—because Clavering said so.

He did not enthuse, however, upon McClure being one of the party. This made Miss Severoid only the more determined to have the trader's company. She said so forcefully, and Cralla shrugged his shoulders indifferently and made no further comment.

Advising that any maids or boys brought along should be very carefully selected, he suggested that Ilora be Miss Severoid's choice for a maid. Though she demurred at that, she did not argue the point. Ilora, with her face buried between her knees, grinned evilly.

"They would be ready to start," as Cralla put it, "four day pass"; which meant Tuesday of the following week.

Returning to the mission in perfect safety, and reaching her room by way of the deserted kitchen and dining-room, Miss Severoid dismissed Ilora pleasantly enough. The Jackrie girl having gone to her mat in the mud hut, her mistress stood for some little time watching the light that burned in McClure's office.

The missionary and his wife had retired an hour before, and the beach was very still.

Then, suddenly yet deliberately, Miss Severoid blew out the white-shaded lamp, leaving the green burning brightly; and, with another glance across the creek, she slipped out into the dining-room and down the rear stairs, coming to a halt in the kitchen doorway. But only for a moment.

The back-beach watch-boy's lamp wagged to the right of the mission hall; and when the boy turned

and went the other way, Miss Severoid gathered her skirts firmly in both hands and tiptoed swiftly past him, with but a faint flutter of petticoats, into the grove of palms. Along this she sped at breakneck pace till she reached the bridge.

There, panting and leaning heavily upon the wooden rail, she stopped to listen and to wait.

CHAPTER XV

THE "TRAP"

McClure was not compelled to write his late senior assistant's mother. He had already cabled Marsden & Co.'s home office in Liverpool, which was all that was expected of him, apart from gathering the deceased's belongings together and shipping them home.

But he perspired over that voluntary epistle of consolation, told soothing lies about the dead, and omitted to mention that much cold beer is sometimes responsible for blackwater fever, particularly when the seasons are changing.

I can assure you that everything that could be done—

He raised his head, dabbed the perspiration from his forehead and neck, glanced out through his windows and saw that Miss Severoid's white-shaded lamp was out, while the other with the green shade burned steadily.

Instantly he sprang to his feet with a half-smothered exclamation of surprise and anger, remembering at once that when the white light went out first it was the signal that Miss Severoid needed help.

It was no time for questions or for the harboring of resentment, he told himself hurriedly, tightening his belt and grabbing up his revolver as he went out. He could blow Clavering's head off and be of service to the whole community.

Miss Severoid's share in the matter was simply that of the flame that had singed the moth's wings, making the shooting easier.

And any one who would have had the temerity to suggest any deeper motive for McClure's speed would have been in danger of his life.

Swinging down-stairs to the beach three steps at a time, yet quietly, he ran a few yards, walked, then ran again, passing the surprised watch-boy with a grunted "All right, Dubla," and, reaching the bridge, made its long-suffering planks creak under his pounding weight.

Then he plunged into the avenue of palms.

"Mr. McClure!"

He stopped as though lassoed from behind, and whirling about, heard the flutter of skirts and saw a shadow come from behind a palm.

"It—it's me," the shadow said naïvely. "And—and he's gone. I ran away from him down the back stairs."

She was at McClure's side very quickly, gripping his arms and looking affrightedly up into his face.

He did not speak. But she could feel him tremble as though he were afraid of her.

"I meant to come right over the bridge to you," she confided simply. "But your watch-boy frightened me, and I didn't want everybody to know that—that—you know what I mean?"

A short pause.

"Is your head all better?"

McClure stiffened.

"Thank you. It is quite better."

Another pause. They had the world to themselves.

"You—you're angry with me?"

Something like a snort of annoyance came from the depths of McClure's chest.

"No. Not at all. How do you know he is gone?"

"Because I heard him," Miss Severoid lied deliberately. "He—he's a beast!"

"Is he? Why to-night any more than—any other time?"

Then Miss Severoid knew why McClure had become cold and distant. Her hands fell from his arms and, turning her face in the direction of the mission, she moved away from him without another word, and drifted slowly into the darkness.

McClure did not stir for quite a while.

Then he followed. There was a furrow of pain between his eyes.

At the mission-end of the avenue Miss Severoid stopped and waited.

"Why do you follow me?" she asked, and her tone indicated that she was a little tired of misunderstandings and of fighting.

"To be sure that you reach home safely."

Yet another pause. Neither moved. The watch-boy's lamp glimmered through the trees.

"I—I wish you wouldn't be so—terribly proper. I'd rather you got decently angry and swore. But you can take me to the foot of the stairs if you like."

"Thank you."

"Oh—bosh!"

She suddenly linked her arm in his and, without further ado, started off again, crossing the mission beach without attempting to elude the watch-boy. Calling softly to him that it was "All right," she led McClure to the kitchen doorway.

There she halted again.

"I'll go this way," she whispered. "Because I might wake Mrs. Steel if I went up the front stairs. It—it's terribly dark in there, isn't it?"

"Yes, quite," McClure agreed, peering into the kitchen. "Shall I find a lamp for you?"

"N-no; never mind. And if I break my neck on the stairs it wouldn't matter much, would it?"

"That depends on what your life is worth to you," McClure returned in sonorous ease. "Are you quite sure he is gone? If you ran away from him, how do you know he isn't waiting for you to come back again?"

"Don't! You frighten me! Per—perhaps you'd better—better come up and make sure."

McClure smiled under cover of the darkness and secretly congratulated himself for having been so clever as to frighten her into proffering the invitation.

"Yes, I think I'd better," he agreed, and they moved into the deeper darkness of the kitchen.

Miss Severoid's soft left hand groped a little while, then crept trustingly into McClure's giant right. She felt him start, stop, and then go on again breathing audibly.

They climbed the stairs in silence, and crept quietly into the dining-room; then, leading the way on tiptoe and pulling on McClure's index finger, Miss Severoid very carefully piloted him into her sitting-room.

"He's gone!" she sighed thankfully after a quick glance around the room. "I suppose he thought I'd wake everybody up. Sit down a minute till I get my breath."

And she led him to a chair, sat him down in it, and stood off a pace or two, stirring up the air with a dainty fan and smiling rather sadly over the top of it.

McClure felt ill at ease and looked it. He had a curious sensation of having been trapped (which he had been), and though the jaws of the trap were soft as velvet, they held more firmly than any steel.

Then Miss Severoid put the fan aside. She rarely used one, because "you always feel so much warmer afterward."

"Do you know that you have been very disagreeable?" she asked quietly, standing scarcely a foot away from McClure's chair. "And I thought I could trust you not to judge harshly or in haste. But I'm going away next week—Tuesday—and since you are here, I thought I'd tell you that you won't have to bother about me after that. It will be a relief, won't it?"

McClure's face showed some of his surprise. He choked down the rest.

"Being transferred to Calabar, I suppose?" he asked, trying to speak as though it did not matter very much to him.

"Oh, no, nothing like that. I'm going to—Benin City."

"Ben—"

McClure's mouth remained open. Then he laughed shortly in ridicule.

"That should be very interesting."

"Yes, I think so, too. Chief Cralla is going to take me there. He knows all about the place."

"You—you're *mad!*"

McClure started from his chair, thunder in his face and lightning in his glance.

Miss Severoid calmly drew back a pace.

"Sh! You might wake Mrs. Steel," she cautioned softly. "And you don't look a bit nice—that way."

McClure swallowed, subsided slowly, and sat quite still.

For a longer time than he had any idea of he made no further comment, but his heavy look of interrogation did not wander from her face for the fraction of a second. She returned his scrutiny quietly, a quaint smile lurking in the corners of her mouth.

"What is this?" McClure asked moodily at last. "A joke?"

Miss Severoid shook her head.

"No. Serious as can be. I want to go to Benin City, and I am going to start next Tuesday with Chief Cralla. If we can't get a launch, we are going to take Cralla's forty-paddle canoe and, of course, a whole lot of things to eat. That's why I'm telling you about it, because if I placed the order for provisions with any one else, the consulate people might hear of my expedition, and be mean enough to prevent me going. But I can trust you not to say a word about it, can't I?"

McClure smiled in a sickly fashion, not at all sure why he did so, because he was groping in an outer mental darkness that made him feel very stupid and unequal to the occasion. He tried to say something—something sententious and fitting that would grip the whole business at once, fling it aside, and have done with all the damn tomfoolery.

To begin with, Benin City and suicide were correlatives. They went hand in hand like "father and son." Life was the cheapest thing in the place. Particularly a white man's, which had no value whatever except as a source of amusement for those who loved to watch its light flicker and die—slowly, very slowly.

So, of course, that was impossible; and as for traveling alone with Chief Cralla—

McClure's vocabulary did not suffice. It became pale and weak and doddering when he tried to say what he thought of *that!*

Consequently, he did not say anything about it; just sputtered for a minute or two. Then, rising suddenly to the full measure of his seventy-four inches, he decided tersely:

"I won't fill your order for provisions."

Miss Severoid's mouth drooped instantly and pitifully, and the look she gave him made him feel that perhaps he had been unnecessarily brutal.

The trouble, he told himself quickly, was that she

did not understand. Some one had been filling her head with a lot of nonsense—Clavering probably; and some one else would have to knock it out again—but in a manner somewhat more gentle than his first attempt.

Then, she was standing very near him. It was difficult to understand how she had come so near. All the world around him, its scattered lights, its indistinct sounds, its silences, and its gloom—faded.

"Do you *really* mean that you won't fill my provision order?"

Her voice was soft, her glance of trusting confidence still softer. And the tips of her fingers were upon his arm, lightly, so that he knew they were there and no more than that.

"But, good heavens, Miss Severoid! You—"

"Please! No excuses or reasons or arguments. I know them all already. Benin City is terrible and wicked and filthy and cruel, and I may never come back. But I am going there, if I have to go alone and crawl on my hands and knees to it. Even if I have no food; even if—oh, in spite of everything that isn't nice or right or proper or sane! I'm going! That's settled—like the laws of the Medes and Persians.

"Now, will you fill my order? Yes or no?"

McClure made no answer, but subconsciously his arms crept up, and gently gripping her arms, he held her away from him, and looked into her face as though he were studying every line and curve with a microscope.

Miss Severoid did not mind; at least she made no objection.

"I—see," he said sonorously at last.

"What?" Miss Severoid smiled expectantly.

"Er—nothing. Might I ask *why* you want to go to Benin City so desperately?"

Miss Severoid made a delightful little grimace which said that questions were barred.

"Perhaps I'll tell you if you promise to let me have the provisions," came the careful answer.

McClure's grip upon her arms relaxed hopelessly.

"Please sit down. I can talk to you better that way."

Somewhat dazed, and feeling his command of himself and his convictions regarding the impossibility of everything slowly diminishing, McClure resumed his seat. The dull clanging of a beach-bell told him it was eleven-thirty, but he was not thinking of that when Miss Severoid stood beside his chair, and seemed likely to perch herself upon the arm of it at any moment.

"Do you know that sometimes you are just a great big boy?" she reproved gently, and her eyes glowed with motherliness. "Most men are. You want to be petted and pampered and made much of, and you sulk and jump to all sorts of nasty conclusions about things. Not because you think your conclusions are true, but because you want to justify your sulkiness with something or other.

"I might tell you why I allowed some one to come here—and then you'd be all better again, and you'd be miserable, too, for thinking whatever you did think. But I won't tell you. I won't pamper your vanity that far. Because if you won't give me these old provisions I'll just do without them. But please don't be mean. Just help me and—and perhaps I might even let you go with me!"

She laughed teasingly down at him, and saw a glimmer of hope in his face. His answering smile was a shame-faced affair, and he looked as if he had been lectured and did not know what to say in his own defense.

But the dogged sort of pride he had helped him a little.

"How—er—that is—how do you know I would go, even if you were so very good as to give me a chance to commit suicide that way?"

Miss Severoid's glance ridiculed the possibility of his going.

"Oh, I was only joking. I wouldn't ask you to go —wouldn't have it on my conscience. You see, I know where I am going and why, and I know the chance I am taking in traveling alone with Cralla, and—and trusting to the advice of some one else. But *you* don't know anything about it. All you know about me is that I was a shepherdess once—and that isn't very much, is it?"

McClure went a little farther out to sea. He tried desperately to understand and to frame a question that might help to elucidate matters.

"You—that is—you have a very particular reason —in fact a desperate reason for wanting to go to Benin City?"

"Isn't that obvious?"

"Yes, I suppose so. And Clavering, after some gentle persuasion, offered his advice?"

"M-hm." She said it like a child of ten.

McClure regarded her in silence, very much troubled.

"And you are going to take his advice?"

"Exactly."

A pause. McClure chewed upon his mustache with a cloud hovering over his eyes. Miss Severoid appeared to be interested in a sand-colored house-lizard pursuing a fly, and there was nothing in her expression that even hinted at an understanding of the danger in the venture upon which she was so determined to embark.

"Why—Cralla?" McClure asked at last.

"Cralla is a friend of Daka's and knows the place."

"Umph! And friend Clavering? What's *his* share in the plot?"

"He's not going," idly moving toward a small table and picking up the fan again.

"Not going! Do you expect me to believe that Clavering hasn't some ulterior motive in—"

"He may have," indifferently. "I haven't had time to bother about that. Without him I could do nothing. With him I believe I can do anything. And I think you know it, though you are too stubborn to admit it.

"Anyway, you're not so horrified as you were at first, and presently you'll begin to think that it might be possible to go even to Benin City and come back alive. Of course, you haven't the incentive I've got. That makes a difference.

"I am going from Akerri Creek on Tuesday night at twelve, and I'd like the provisions and things to be there at eleven-thirty. If you'd like to bring them yourself and say good-by to me, you may. Clavering won't be there. Just Cralla and his boys and my maid and I. I'll send you the provision-list to-morrow or next day. Will that do?"

McClure wanted to say no—to rise and condemn the venture roundly and pronounce it to be a dastardly trick of Clavering's to inveigle Miss Severoid away from the safety of the settlement into—

But McClure's mind dared not go any further than that.

And something he had seen in Miss Severoid's face when he had studied it so closely had told him it would be useless to argue or try to dissuade; an indefinable something in the set of her firm little jaws that made danger and death seem wofully insignificant.

So he made no further comments; just rose slowly

to his feet. She backed away from him as though she were a little afraid.

The beach bell said it was twelve o'clock.

"Very well. Send the provision-list over any time. I'll look after it."

"Oh—thank you!"

Her hand went out impulsively and, for want of anything better, caught at the second button of his light flannel coat, which she twisted about nervously, looking as though she wanted to say something and couldn't.

"You—you believe in me, don't you?"

It came slantingly up at him from under her drooping lashes; a look in which there was a great deal of heaven and just a trace of—elsewhere.

McClure's hands moved restlessly, and for a second or two it was as if he would take the same liberty that Clavering had.

And then he straightened, silently exhaling the deep breath he had drawn.

"All right. Send the list over any time. Good night."

In a second Miss Severoid was alone and in another her eyes were misty.

But she shook her head in protest against the threatening tears and, going out upon the veranda, gazed with trancelike steadiness at the shrouded river.

A low-draft cargo boat lay off the Produce Association beach, and her lights were the only ones twinkling upon the water. Everything was darkness and silence and the promise of terrible things to come.

Miss Severoid was not thinking of them, however. Her mind was triumphantly whispering in the teeth of the last thing Clavering had said to her.

"He'll come! Yes, he will! And I didn't have to kiss him once!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE FALL OF MC CLURE

McClure felt somewhat numb and dazed. He was not quite sure, as he pounded his way back to Marsden's, whether he had been more of a cad than a simpleton—or just a plain fool. Probably a mixture of all three. He was equally uncertain regarding the particular process by which Miss Severoid had made his sullen determination not to be "fooled again" alter to a sneaking sensation that he owed her an apology.

His mind blinked, searched, and blinked again.

Miss Severoid had been simply herself—sweet and gentle and forgiving and beautiful. Nothing more than that; yet, without effort, she had robbed him of the things he might have said—had made him believe that he had reason to be ashamed of himself.

She had suggested that he should atone for his hasty judgment by bringing the provisions down to Akerri Creek on Tuesday at eleven-thirty, so that he might have an opportunity to wish her a *safe journey—to Benin City—in the company of Chief Cralla!*

Quite as if she were going to Brighton with her mother!

McClure's jaws dropped foolishly.

Great Heavens! What had he been thinking about? It was impossible, insane, suicidal!

There was everything against it—reason, experience, propriety—and nothing for it.

Arguments and threats of danger he might have used to prove to Miss Severoid just how utterly im-

possible, insane and suicidal it was came to his tongue in a flood. He would put a stop to the crazy undertaking; he would not let her go; he would—

And then he smiled in a sickly, annoyed way, knowing very well that his arguments and threats would be entirely useless.

In the succeeding few days McClure felt, in truth, a little ashamed of himself; partly because he had so hastily judged a lady and had so palpably made his judgment known, but greatly because in satisfying his own resentment against Clavering he had allowed that shifty gentleman to slip through his fingers.

Because of that he felt still more responsible for Miss Severoid's safety.

He considered that, having allowed Clavering to escape, he was in a great measure responsible for the outlaw's future depredations. Although he could not protect every one from the spoiler, he could at least do what he could for those he knew to be in danger.

It was a magnificent argument.

But "those in danger" went no further than Miss Severoid!

In short, he had no intention of allowing her to travel alone in the company of the chief of Akerri. That was neither nice nor safe.

If he could not dissuade her from her purpose, there was but one thing left for him to do. And he spent a great deal of his time making plausible excuses to himself for even thinking about it.

But apart from all that he felt that there was treachery afoot. He did not trust Clavering's advice. It interested him to learn how Cralla had become a toady of the outlaw's so quickly after the Saganna affair, at which Cralla had been most rabidly anti-Clavering.

That in itself was suspicious, and McClure believed that by thrusting his company upon the expedition without a word of warning he could quickly get a hint of "something in the wind" by the manner in which Cralla accepted him.

Which proves how very wide of the mark McClure really was.

But so far as the reason for the expedition was concerned, the vague guess he made was not so poor. He believed that, somehow or other, the reason spelled—Debenham.

He had nothing very definite upon which to build such a conclusion. Nothing more than that Miss Severoid and Ralph Debenham had been "something to each other"; that Miss Severoid was not in any sense a Mission Lady; and that she had allowed, perhaps encouraged, Clavering to call upon her so that she might have the benefit of his advice and assistance in a matter in which he, because of his knowledge of things "under the surface," was better able to give advice than any one.

"Without Clavering I could do nothing; with him, I believe I can do anything."

McClure recalled that expression of Miss Severoid's attitude toward the outlaw with something of a jar; but he had to admit the truth of it, if she were really searching for the vanished assistant. Since Cralla had been Debenham's closest friend among the natives, the chief's part in the proposed expedition dovetailed very neatly into McClure's hypothesis. This was just insufficient enough to make him wish to augment or disprove it.

When Miss Severoid's provision-list reached him he smiled at its frugality, which he attributed to a naïve ignorance. He made up a list of his own, adding

numerous necessities in the way of cooking utensils, cutlery, earthenware, liquors for native—and human—consumption; camp equipment, and native rations. The last Miss Severoid had omitted altogether.

A son of the Delta may find canned *pâté de foies gras* palatable, but he prefers a portion of salt beef large enough to necessitate the use of both hands, and which he can tear apart with teeth that have been filed for that purpose.

On Tuesday morning McClure sent for his stock clerk—his second in command since the shop clerk had died—and gave him the list.

"I am going for a little jaunt, Mr. Graham," he explained ambiguously. "And I am not sure when I may be back. Have that stuff on board the *Rover* after dinner to-night—no later than ten o'clock—and don't make a fuss about it. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. And—er—you needn't bother seeing me off."

"Very good, sir. And when you are gone—"

"Oh, yes. I cabled the home office last Friday to send me some one to take Gilmore's place, and I imagine they'll transfer a man from Bonny, Bakana, or Calabar. He should be here in a week at latest. Then you'll stay in the shop and give the new man the stock. Just let things run easily till I get back, and don't try your 'prentice hand on prices. Let them stand."

"Very good, sir. I hope you'll have a pleasant trip."

"Thanks. I think I shall. And if you take care of my job as well as you have been in the habit of taking care of yourself, the firm won't have anything to worry about."

Graham tried to mumble his appreciation of the compliment and sidled toward the door.

"And by the way," McClure halted him. "You might keep an eye on Tait, and don't let him sit alone in his room at night. Take him out—make him drunk if you like, but don't let him think. He's got lots of sand, but too much imagination. I think you'd better get him to change rooms with Parsons or the new man. Theirs don't face the cemetery."

Graham did not smile. "All right, sir."

McClure grunted.

"I hope it is," he muttered and stared sullenly out through the open windows down river.

Graham waited. He knew there was something else.

Then McClure's hand went out suddenly and savagely for a cable blank.

"Get a canoe ready to go down to Burutu with this at once," he snapped. Dabbing his pen into the ink, he wrote in the firm's private code as Graham hurried to obey:

MARSDEN & Co., Liverpool.
Recall Tait per cable immediately. Pay him year's salary and charge the difference to me. Too young. I want men. This isn't a kindergarten. McCLURE, Segwanga.

A little later, watching the cable messenger paddling swiftly toward the Burutu curve, McClure bit upon his cigar a little harder and mumbled:

"It won't hurt so badly coming from headquarters —and he'll thank me for it ten years hence."

Ilora carried Miss Severoid's small uniform case down to the waiting canoe at eleven-fifteen on Tuesday night.

She made no attempt at concealment. The missionary and his wife had retired punctually at ten, as was their habit, and the water-front watch-boy was

huddled under the stairway with an empty bottle of very bad Hamburg gin at his side.

Miss Severoid did not know that.

During these preliminaries to the expedition she was in Ilora's hands. Somewhat pale and biting nervously at her lips, she followed the Jackrie girl on tiptoe to the wharf-steps.

Halting there a moment, she looked up at Mrs. Steel's windows, then went slowly down the steps, and took her place in the canoe.

A convulsive little shudder shook her from head to foot as the shell-like craft slid away from the steps, and she clenched her hands tightly and shut her teeth firmly upon a threatening sob.

For a while she sat quite still, looking straight ahead, numb and cold in the grip of a terror she could not shake off. Then, with a supreme effort, she looked behind.

And faintly she saw a large "something" come leisurely out of the gloom and follow them.

The color came back into her cheeks and lips; the numbness and the terror drifted as if by magic. She hugged herself in a sudden ecstasy, and a wonderful smile curved her lips.

She knew that the larger "something" in the rear was the *Rover*.

Under the guidance of a colored engineer who answered to the prosaic name of John, the *Rover* crept slowly after Ilora's canoe to the mouth of Akerri Creek, where another canoe of much larger dimensions waited.

That was Cralla's forty-paddle power craft, boasting a mat-strewn "deck" and an awning of woven native grasses.

Twenty boys sat forward of the deck and twenty aft. They were all garbed alike, in white singlets

and bright-red overcloths, and they had been trained to appreciate the gift of silence to such an extent that there was not even a whisper heard among them.

In a few moments McClure had inserted the *Rover* and himself into the proceedings, without, however, making known his full intentions.

Cralla seemed rather glad to see him—a fact which did not surprise McClure in the least. It only made him all the more suspicious.

From her uncertain seat in Ilora's canoe Miss Severoid greeted him with a smile that was lost in the darkness. But he heard her whisper:

"It was very good of you to come. I'd like to go up there to see that everything is all right with the provisions and to pay my bill."

So McClure assisted her to the deck of the launch, while Cralla, peering out from under the awning of his canoe, watched their every movement.

Ilora waited.

"Where are they?" Miss Severoid asked a little breathlessly, referring to the provisions.

And McClure caught her arm and stayed her a yard or two from the little cabin doorway.

"Never mind. I'll look after them. And I think you'd better get your maid up here and take possession of the cabin. Plymouth!"

"Yessah."

A massive black object appeared out of a coil of rope and shuffled into more distinct shape and view, resolving into a squat, broad-visaged Kroo-boy who had been called Plymouth because he had, by accident upon one occasion, been carried that far away from home on an English cargo-boat.

His face was mostly mouth and nose, and he did not seem to have any eyes at all. But alone and unaided he could heave a one-hundred-and-ninety-gallon

puncheon of palm-oil off its bilge, consequently proving himself to be of more service in the world than some of his more civilized white brothers who use the oil in the form of scented soaps.

"Small box live for canoe," McClure said tersely, referring to Miss Severoid's uniform case. "Bring it up and put it in the cabin."

"Yessah."

"But—" Miss Severoid protested, and really did not try to go any further.

"I think you'll find the cabin comfortable," McClure interrupted deliberately, and, taking her gently by the shoulders, turned her face toward it. "And please don't force me to make a bigger fool of myself than I am now. I am going to talk to Cralla about his boys. We won't need them all."

Miss Severoid glanced quickly up into his face, and her expression was one of blank amazement.

"You—*you're coming with us?*"

McClure looked as though he were ashamed of himself.

"I am afraid I am," he said incisively, and abruptly turned from her to the rail to hold whispered consultation with Cralla, feeling that he had "taken command of the situation."

Miss Severoid, descending into the *Rover's* cabin, smiled sweetly and knowingly into the eery darkness—unafraid.

The following morning Segwanga awoke to learn that Miss Severoid had departed in the night, taking her small cabin trunk with her, and that McClure of Marsden's had also gone—nowhere in particular.

Which of course made Segwanga gasp.

But after a while it began to think, and speedily came to the very natural conclusion that Miss Severoid

and McClure had gone off together. In short, that they had—eloped!

Though Heaven alone knew where they could elope to.

In any case, some of the men smiled, others were curious and cynical and predicted dire disaster, while the rest simply "didn't know what to think."

But there was no search-party organized. Even the district commissioner took the matter rather phlegmatically, though he did send a runner to Saloko to let his friend Talbot, the D. C. there, know about it. But it was generally conceded that McClure, knowing the country as he did, knew too much to be found if he did not wish to be.

Clavering had thought of that when he had suggested McClure as a companion for Miss Severoid.. His own name was never even hinted at in connection with the matter.

The burden of responsibility for Miss Severoid's safety rested entirely on McClure's broad shoulders.

Killing several birds with one stone was a subtle science with Clavering.

CHAPTER XVII

ON THE MAYONA ROAD

TRAILING Chief Cralla's canoe behind, the *Rover* reached Saloko the following evening, purposely after dark and without incident. In fact, that first leg of the trip was almost tiresome, even to Miss Severoid.

There was nothing to see. The solid, drab-green bank of the bush followed them in two almost incessant, interminable lines, broken only at intervals where a few dun-colored mud huts obtruded themselves, or where the ravaging fury of wind and rain had torn up trees by the roots and lashed the unchanging green into white-scarred, yawning hollows.

One creek was just like another. Though they passed innumerable canoes of all sizes, none afforded more than a lazy glance of interest. The few cargo-boats they encountered were no more exciting than cargo-boats usually are, except that John, the engineer, had instructions to avoid them as much as possible.

And when Miss Severoid had counted the third floating body of a native, riding leisurely upon his watery bier toward the sea, even that gruesome spectacle had lost its newness, though it made her feel chilly and unpleasantly uncertain about the stability of her knees.

Those bodies had not been committed to the waters with any great ceremony; most of them by the simple medium of a violent push, accompanied by an unexpected blow from behind with the butt of a muzzle-

loader or the broad blade of a machete; and as the tentacles of law and order were still a trifle short and inefficient, they did not reach far enough to pry into matters so purely personal to the family. So the bodies just drifted and nobody bothered very much about them.

Cralla had accepted McClure almost without comment, and had quite willingly agreed that, in view of the assistance the launch would give, at least ten of his boys would be unnecessary.

Consequently, that number had been left behind at Akerri. The others were to act as carriers.

The chief had not supplied McClure with any definite information regarding the proposed entrance into Benin City, nor did he say why they were going there. So far as McClure was concerned, the whole affair was wrapped in a veil of mystery, the solution to which he could only conjecture. He was not even in Miss Severoid's confidence, and, stubbornly determined not to ask for information, he avoided her as much as the limited dimensions of the launch would permit.

Miss Severoid appreciated his situation perfectly; knew that he was there simply to guide and to guard, without having more than a vague conception of why she was doing so desperate a thing; and as once before —the first time she had met him, in fact—she had wished to tell him the whole story from beginning to end, she was tempted to do so again ere they reached Saloko. But she didn't.

McClure's devotion was so large and so splendidly blind that she thought she would enjoy it while she could.

Afterward?

Miss Severoid was afraid there wouldn't be any afterward.

For the greater part of the way to Saloko Cralla lolled upon the matted "deck" of his canoe with a black tarpaulin-covered carrier's pack for a pillow, and was apparently oblivious of all that went on about him, rousing himself into a sitting posture only when it was time to eat. According to his attitude, the venture had all the aspects of a picnic.

Then in a dark, bush-bound creek a short distance south of Saloko the launch came to a stop opposite a deserted clearing—deserted presumably because a *juju* had hurled an anathema upon it—and a landing was effected without interruption or intrusion.

A bush path led from the rear of the clearing to the Benin City road, and within an hour the carriers had taken up their apportioned loads and had started off, led by a lamp-boy.

There were few words spoken.

Cralla muttered orders in Jackrie, interspersed with an appropriate oath or two, and the threat of choice punishments for those among the carriers who stumbled or were otherwise tardy. He did not approach within a dozen yards of Miss Severoid during the proceedings; in fact, he so palpably held aloof that his attitude toward her was obvious even to McClure, who stood by her side quietly watching the carriers load up in the very uncertain light of a few hurricane lamps.

Cralla followed them from the clearing with a grunted "All ri'!" that fell somewhere between Miss Severoid and McClure, and with an answering grunt and a final glance about him the trader ordered Ilora to follow Cralla.

Then, with Plymouth showing the way with a lamp, he and Miss Severoid brought up the rear, while the launch, towing Cralla's canoe, departed into hiding near the village of Okanna, where it was to remain until called for.

Miss Severoid clung tightly to McClure's arm, but she made no sound; and the trader, measuring his step to hers, gave no hint of his sensations in speech. But he felt as though he ought to pick her up and carry her.

Bush travel is bad enough in daylight, particularly when the rainy season is near. But at night it is infinitely worse; fraught with many unpleasantnesses, including snakes, centipedes; loose, hanging branches that threaten the eyes; treacherous hollows underfoot that play havoc with one's ankles, and all manner of things that crawl, fly, and sting and leave ugly sores.

On beaten paths, however, the toil is not so great. Miss Severoid was to learn that the path from the deserted clearing of Buloki to the Benin City "road"—a distance of about two miles—was a boulevard compared with others she was forced to travel. The carriers tramping on ahead did double duty, inasmuch as they cleared the path of trailing creepers and crawling undergrowths, and whispered hoarse warning when a branch hung too low.

Then they were out upon the Benin City road—a path a few feet broader than usual—and the pace increased.

Their objective was Taomi, which they hoped to reach before midnight, so that they might start again early in the morning and accomplish several hours' marching ere the noonday sun brought them to a halt.

And with nothing more startling than the yelping of hungry bush-dogs, the squeaking chatter and frightened scampering of little colonies of wakeful monkeys, the silent party tramped through the sweltering night and trooped into Taomi shortly after eleven o'clock.

Apparently Cralla—or Clavering perhaps—had made all the necessary arrangements, even to provid-

ing Miss Severoid with a "private hut," in which among other things she was startled to find a perfectly new and clean camp-bed, draped with mosquito-curtains.

McClure, who stood in the doorway, studied the evidences of Clavering's thoughtfulness in silence, while Miss Severoid, rather pale and very tired, clumped with an honest sigh of relief into an unbelievable Madeira chair and stretched her aching limbs out upon the leg-rest.

Cralla was somewhere in the blackness outside, ordering his boys about; and Ilora, placid of countenance, hung back in the shadows near the bed, awaiting the pleasure of her mistress.

Then Plymouth appeared behind McClure, carrying something very bulky on his back.

"Be bed foh Mishun Lady, sah!" he grunted, since his master did not move out of the doorway to let him pass.

McClure did not even turn his head.

"All right. Take it back and pack it up again. It isn't needed."

"A' ri', sah!" Plymouth grumbled and ambled heavily away.

"Oh, I didn't know you had—" Miss Severoid began in a hopeless, apologetic tone, and tried to see McClure's face more distinctly.

"I think you should be fairly comfortable," came the measured interruption. "Better get all the sleep you can. Good night!"

"Good—good night!"

She heard him striding away, and heard him stop to speak to Cralla in a mixture of Jackrie and pidgin English that was most exasperating. There was something about "sunrise" and "Mayona," and the

chief's fawning, "Yessah, Mistah MaClu'!" to everything the trader said had an ominous hint of sneering laughter in it.

Then, as she lay back in her chair and allowed Ilora to unlace her walking-boots, her eyelids drooped and the sounds without became a distant hum. She was too tired to be afraid.

In a few minutes, according to her calculations, it was morning. She sat up in bed and, rubbing her eyes vigorously, found Ilora, sullen and uncommunicative, standing over her with a cup of very hot cocoa in her hand.

Closer examination discovered a neatly folded *chit* in the saucer, and Miss Severoid almost upset the cup in her anxiety to know what the note contained.

Hope you slept well. I think you had better use the hammock most of the way to Mayona. It is rather rough underfoot, and you are not accustomed to this sort of thing.

I shall probably have an opportunity to talk to you in Mayona, and you can tell me what you think of Cralla's behavior. Till then—*au revoir*. G. C.

Miss Severoid was not in the least sleepy after that, particularly when she saw the hammock that had been left at her door as by a fairy princess in the night. Her spirits took a sudden bound, and she even hummed to herself as she dressed, seeming to forget the stuffiness of the hut and the noisome odors that threatened to make breakfast a difficulty.

But, as if to prove how exhilarating an effect Clavering's note had had, she ate with relish the early breakfast Ilora brought in a little later.

The Jackrie girl's face wore a mask. She had scarcely slept at all, but had lain all night upon a mat near the door, watching the mosquito-curtained camp-bed with venom-filled eyes.

There was nothing very definite about her hatred.

Jealousy, of course, had some part in it; but the soft whiteness of Miss Severoid's skin was so wonderfully soft and white and unblemished that Ilora had an unholy desire to mutilate it. But she knew that to rise and chop at Miss Severoid's head with a machete would not gain her anything more than a momentary satisfaction, because she, too, would surely die.

Cralla would slit her throat like a bush-dog's, and would trail her to the shores of Lake Tchad to do it; and, apart from not being anxious to die at all, Ilora had notions about death that soared a little higher than a bush-dog's.

When McClure came in to advise that everything was in readiness Ilora backed into a corner, showing the whites of her eyes.

She was afraid of McClure at any time, but particularly in the daylight. When he looked at her she quaked; when he ignored her and gave all his attention to Miss Severoid she hated the latter a little more and did not so much regret having struck McClure with a hurricane lamp. She hoped he would quickly learn of Miss Severoid's "perfidy," and would promptly wreak an appropriate vengeance upon her.

Ilora wanted to be there when he did it.

"Some one seems to have been very good to you," McClure remarked casually to Miss Severoid as he looked the hammock over. "I suppose these are your bearers?"

Four boys in the Cralla regalia of white singlets and red overcloths hung about the door, waiting for orders. McClure knew they were not Akerri boys, but that they had been hired from the chief of Taomi for the occasion.

Miss Severoid smilingly joined the trader in the doorway.

"Oh, isn't that nice?" she exclaimed sweetly, and as

though she had not seen the hammock before. "Are they going to carry me? I hope I don't fall out."

"There isn't much fear of that," McClure returned, and his glance traveled to where all of Taomi was gathered in chattering discord about Cralla and the carriers, who were making ready to take up their packs. "And I think you had better get into it and drop the curtains so that the common eye of Taomi may not see who is so great as to be permitted to use Harmattan Clavering's hammock."

Miss Severoid shot him a sidelong glance and found him passive.

"It was very thoughtful of him, don't you think so?" she asked rather timidly after a pause.

"Very," McClure answered tersely, and said nothing about the hammock he had included in his own equipment.

That was the second time in a very few hours that Clavering had forestalled him, thereby depriving him of the pleasure of showing Miss Severoid how thoughtful he, McClure, had been.

A few minutes later, with Cralla driving his carriers on ahead, McClure walked beside the curtained hammock. Plymouth and Ilora brought up the rear, while Taomi town—more than half naked, but unashamed—jabbered and mumbled a sullen good-by.

Then the suffocating oppressiveness and the insalubrious odors of the village were left behind. The low-hanging morning mist lifted and vanished as the sun climbed steadily over the bush-rimmed horizon.

But, as Clavering had said in his note, the road to Mayona was rather rough underfoot.

It was worse than that; a mere ribbon of a path that wound its uneven way through the gloomy and stifling heart of the bush, and seemed to lead to no-

where. Its curves and twists were baffling, and, criss-crossed by other similar paths, the result was a confusing network of byways, any of which might have been the Mayona road.

Yet Cralla, looking neither to right nor left, and betraying none of his private opinions upon the business, went steadily on, herding his carriers before him like cattle. Not once did he turn his head to look back. He had not addressed a single remark to the "beautiful white lady" since the trip began.

As for Miss Severoid, she was very grateful for the hammock, even though the jolting and swaying of it resembled the experience she had had in the turbulent Bay of Biscay, when the waves were washing the windows of the saloon companion.

But there was no fear in her face as they plunged mile after mile into the mysterious Beni country, and McClure, pounding along at her side, mopping the perspiration from his face and forehead, studied her surreptitiously and wondered what magnificent hope kept her face so calm and her eyes so marvelously tender.

He spoke but seldom. It was too hot to talk. Every little while he glanced upward through the leafy covering overhead in search of rain.

Not that he wanted any. He didn't.

Ilora and Plymouth came on behind at a comfortable, tireless jog; the girl placidly indifferent, the Kroo-boy watching her covetously out of the slits that served him for eyes.

They were a queer company, bent upon a queerer mission.

Traveling natives they met stopped, stared, and then passed on, muttering dire prophecies. The inhabitants of villages that groveled in heathenish filth leaped, as

it seemed, out of the reeking swamps, and strangely marked faces obtruded themselves to peer at the silent procession as at the supernatural.

But there was no sign of hostility; merely the wide-eyed wonder and curiosity that are the due of a phenomenon.

Then, about ten o'clock, when the heat was making itself felt in real earnest, Miss Severoid saw a snake—a silver-and-black reptile of impressive length and girth—wriggling away into the underbrush. She shivered a little; but after that she looked for other things that crept along the ground instead of up into the trees in search of monkeys.

But she did not see any more snakes—not then. In a few minutes it seemed as if the sound of Cralla's voice as he hurried the carriers along was the only sound in the world. Almost every sign of animal life had vanished, and the sun went out behind a gathering of gray-black clouds.

She looked up at McClure to see what he thought about it. Before she could speak a piercing scream broke in upon the choking stillness.

Glancing swiftly ahead, she saw that one of the carriers had fallen, and that Cralla, hippo-hide thong in hand, was standing over the unfortunate wretch, cutting him viciously about the head and shoulders, drawing blood with every lash.

It was not a pleasant sight. Miss Severoid shut her eyes upon it till the hammock suddenly stopped. Then somehow or other she was out of it, racing toward Cralla.

McClure reached him first.

There was a confusion of sounds—of Jackrie oaths and short, sharp words in English, followed by the thud of heavy fists.

Miss Severoid had a vision of McClure standing over the fallen carrier like a sculptured champion of the oppressed; and Cralla, helmetless and clutching his jaw, was staggering into a background of open-mouthed carriers.

Followed a moment or two of deep, deep silence.

Ilora and Plymouth and the hammock-boys were somewhere behind her, but as McClure bent over the moaning victim of Cralla's rage Miss Severoid saw no one but Cralla.

She saw him steady himself, and his face seemed to change in a moment.

The sycophantic chief of Akerri had vanished. In his place there was a snakelike man whose jet-black eyes burned with a hell-born hate, and whose lips, curving over his glistening teeth, made a cruel, wisp-like line. The skin over his cheek-bones drew tighter and tighter till—

Miss Severoid screamed at the horror of it; a short, sharp sound that made McClure straighten suddenly.

And in that second Cralla leaped forward.

The ugly, black hippo thong whirled savagely and cut McClure across the eyes!

A guttural of pain escaped him, and he reeled backward into Plymouth's arms, throwing his hands up to his face. Ilora, who dared not play any part, hung, moaning and quivering, in the rear.

Miss Severoid did not move. She was staring at Cralla with a queer look of unbelief in her face.

Her head was swimming round; but she had a hazy understanding of the fact that Cralla was looking straight at her, and that a moment or two later he was cringing away from her step by step till he finally turned with amazing swiftness and ran into the sudden blackness that descended upon them.

A dazzling flash of forked lightning rent the world in two. It was followed by a roar as of a hundred cannon.

Miss Severoid wheeled dizzily toward McClure as the first drop of rain splashed hotly upon her hand.

CHAPTER XVIII

THROUGH THE RAIN

Flash followed flash, cleaving the gray darkness as with darting blades of blue-white fire. The rumbling, rolling rattle of the thunder tore the heavens asunder and precipitated the deluge.

The carriers and the hammock bearers had bolted when Cralla did. Only Ilora remained.

Even the carrier McClure had championed had sneaked to his feet and slipped away, leaving his pack behind. The others had taken theirs with them, and, though Ilora knew where they had gone, she remained silently in the background of events, apparently unmindful of the rain, watching Miss Severoid and Plymouth trying to lead McClure into some sort of shelter.

McClure was struggling to see.

There was a band of fire across his eyes; a red, blood-flecked wale that stood out in bold relief against the chalk-whiteness of his passion; and he was like a disturbed mountain in his pain. Plymouth's gorilla-like arms could not hold him.

But the touch of Miss Severoid's fingers halted with magical effect his impotent desire to rush at the spot where he imagined Cralla to be, and produced a condition of passiveness that was pitiful. Nothing was distinct, and he had a somewhat terrifying sensation that if he lifted his eyelids his eyes would fall out—in halves!

And then, answering Miss Severoid's touch and guided by Plymouth's grip upon his right arm, he stumbled blindly through the darkness and the lashing rain in the general direction in which the carriers had gone.

Which was vague enough.

Everything was blurred, and the rain, beating in their faces, forced them to bend their heads and to turn sidewise so that their shoulders bore the brunt of the battle; a battle to which the jagged flashes of lightning and the boom and roar and rattle of nature's heavy artillery lent a fearsome splash of realism.

No one bothered about the pack the carrier had left behind, or about anything except to hope for shelter somewhere—anywhere. In a few moments the little company looked as though it had taken a plunge in the Niger without troubling to undress.

After that it was not getting wet that mattered so much.

There was the danger of falling trees; of choosing the wrong path among a maze of paths, and of groping their way into one of the many villages where, since Cralla had gone, many unpleasantnesses awaited the stranger who did not come properly recommended.

Miss Severoid had a vague recollection that Cralla had turned off the main path to the right, and that the carriers had gone the same way. But where they had gone after that was shrouded in a dull, green mantle of mystery.

Plymouth knew nothing of the country; and McClure, still blindly lurching through a darkness that had nothing to do with the storm, did not even know that Cralla and the carriers had gone.

Ilora followed at a short distance, particularly watching McClure's stumbling gait, till she saw him place his arm about Miss Severoid's shoulders and

draw her into such shelter as his giant body afforded.

McClure did that instinctively—without thought. He could not see; could only feel the beating of the rain and hear the tearing crash of the thunder. The small hands clinging to his arm and helping to guide, seemed to plead for protection.

Ilora's expression of savage pity faded instantly. A cruel grin took its place, and when, obscured by the darkness and the rain, the branching path the carriers had taken escaped even Plymouth's sharp little eyes, the Jackrie girl did not correct the error. She allowed them to go on, and, stopping to look back, her grin broadened.

There was not a soul to see or to hear. Already, in scarcely a minute, Miss Severoid, McClure, and Plymouth, staggering wretchedly in the teeth of the storm, were hazy, ghost-like figures, fading into the gray wall of the rain.

The girl would have given her left arm for a machete just then. She needed her right. But the best she could do, after a few minutes' searching, was a stout mango-stick with one end shaped like a bludgeon.

It might not kill, but it would surely mutilate; and mutilation is an instinctive passion in the savage. Ilora thought Miss Severoid's face altogether too smooth; and there was something devilish in the manner in which the girl crept after her mistress, gripping the mango-stick tightly in her firm and sure right hand.

Her plan was simple. She knew that if she could eliminate Plymouth, she would have little to fear from McClure; and then, when she had all the amusement she wanted at Miss Severoid's expense, she intended to "find them" and lead them to the shelter the carriers had sought. One good blow with the mango-stick would crush Miss Severoid's helmet over her eyes, and

make her quite as sightless as McClure. Plymouth was the only serious difficulty.

The thunder and lightning and the rain did not bother her at all; in fact, they helped, or would when the time came, and though her dark-red overcloth hung to her lithe figure almost as closely as her skin and flopped awkwardly about her ankles, impeding the free movement of her limbs, these things had no effect upon her fiendish determination, unless it was to irritate her and make her more determined.

Huddling into the shelter of McClure's arm and gripping his soggy coat to preserve her balance, Miss Severoid searched for the path the carriers had taken. She was too miserable and too much occupied with McClure's pitiful plight to be afraid upon her own account. Such misgivings as she had were not due to the lurid and thunderous wrath of Heaven, but to the memory of what she had seen in Cralla's face.

His expression had been so horribly indicative of the beast that lurked behind the mask of his urbanity, that it did not augur well for the success of her expedition. If he could lose control of himself once, he could do so again; possibly at a time when something more than a rain storm threatened them.

But she kept her fears tightly locked up in her breast, though she sometimes shuddered and clung closely to McClure as she heard the terrifying, crashing fall of lightning-struck trees.

Every little while she looked up through the blur into McClure's face, and each time pitied him a little more, pleading with Providence for a chance to help him in his helplessness. His head was down and his eyes were closed, partly because the rain stung them like scalding water, and partly because he could not see anything when he opened them.

"Basanna!" he grunted savagely to Plymouth sev-

eral times. "Down on the right. Find it, you bushman! Find it!"

And then he would raise his head and try to find it himself; only to lower it again as the knifelike pains shot through his eyes and seemed to stab into his brain.

His plight was something like that of a huge Atlantic liner with her steering-gear out of commission. He was as massive and as strong as ever, but wholly at the mercy of the elements and of the smallest human who might seek to make prey of him.

Plymouth lurched along, keeping a firm grip of his master's arm, and muttering maledictions upon the particular god of his gods that was responsible for bad weather.

He had no opinions to offer. When McClure grunted "Basanna!" Plymouth said "Yessah! One time, sah!" in a mechanical fashion and, digging his head and shoulders into the driving rain, blinked through the mist in search of the elusive path.

And when he halted at the entrance to a path that shot off at an angle of ninety degrees and which gave promise of leading to something definite, Miss Severoid did not know how far they had gone. So she did not stop to argue the matter, but held on to McClure, and put her fate into the gnarled black hands of the Kroo boy.

None of them was aware of the presence of Ilora in the rear.

Consequently they wheeled into the path that led to Sekomi; that is, the path would ultimately have led them to the native market town of Sekomi if they had followed it properly. Plymouth tried to do so, and Ilora came on behind, creeping very cautiously and grinning into the teeth of the storm.

They went on, heads down, with Plymouth on the right, playing the role of guide. But before they had

gone very far, and hardly aware that he did it, the boy turned his feet into the first path that wound temptingly off the route to Sekomi—to the right.

It is a very easy matter to travel in a circle in the Delta bush, particularly when it rains; much easier to do so than not, and Plymouth succumbed to the temptation to "turn to the right" as often as the chance offered, until in a very short time he was hopelessly tangled and was simply plunging on, hoping that McClure would not find it out.

And then, at the junction of three paths, with Basanna huddling, invisible, behind an impenetrable wall of bush not more than half a mile away, Ilora slipped up behind Plymouth and struck—once, twice, thrice—with such force that, had her bludgeon been a machete, his unprotected head would probably have been cleft to the neckband of his singlet.

As it was, he staggered, loosened his grip upon McClure's arm and, dropping to his knees, fell flat upon his face in the oozy mud and lay still.

McClure heard the vicious hissing sound behind him; heard the thud of the blows and the Kroo boy's grunt of pain and surprise; then felt him slip away from his side.

He stopped, straightened, and tried desperately to see; and in that second, having disposed of Plymouth's strength and sight, Ilora struck with the same vicious savagery at Miss Severoid, who had not had time to think of anything.

The blow crushed her helmet down over her eyes, just as Ilora had supposed it would; made opalescent pin-wheels whirl before her sight, and she thought a tree had fallen. Sagging at the knees, clutching at nothingness for support, she lurched forward a few steps out of the protection of McClure's arms.

A triumphant "A-h-h-h-h!" came from behind.

But as Ilora sprang forward, confident in the safety of McClure's blindness, her career almost came to an abrupt and wholly unexpected end.

Whirling about, maddened with rage and pain, hardly conscious of the danger of it, McClure swung his revolver from his hip in a semicircle, and fired with desperate recklessness into space.

The first of the bullets singed Ilora's crinkly hair just above the ear. She was not more than two feet from the weapon when it happened. The second bullet cut through the space where her head had been as she dropped in a heap, stiff with surprise and fear.

She gaped up through the rain at McClure as though she thought he was not playing quite fair, and her amazement was so complete, it was comical.

There were two more shots, scarcely audible above the tumult of the storm, and then the fifth missed fire. McClure kept the sixth for himself in case he should need it and, still trying to see, waited for the enemy to rush.

Ilora crept to her knees. The whites of her eyes gleamed brightly upon the revolver, and for a second or two it was as if she would snatch it from McClure's grasp. She had been under Clavering's guidance long enough to know how to use one.

However, casting a hurried, furtive glance into the face of the man who had fought Clavering and beaten him—who was as terrible without eyes as with them—and another panic-stricken glance in Plymouth's direction, she saw the Kroo-boy stir and feebly attempt to rise. Suddenly turning and running close to the ground, she wheeled into a branching westbound path and was gone; thereby proving her wisdom in choosing the junction of several paths for the rather useless deed she had perpetrated.

And she did not come back to "find them" and lead

them to the shelter of Basanna; not because she was spiteful—she could not afford to be that—but because, just then, she was as much afraid of McClure in his blindness as she was of the punishment that Cralla would mete out to her for deserting her mistress in the storm.

She might be able to make excuses that would mollify the chief in his rage; but one can't argue or plead with the bullets that come from a blind man's gun.

McClure did not hear her go. The patter of the rain was heavier than that of Ilora's naked feet.

Plymouth raised himself slowly and laboriously upon one knee, felt his head inquiringly, blinked through the mud on his face, then dizzily staggered to his feet and glanced about him.

He saw his master standing stiffly erect, revolver in hand, blindly waiting for the attack that did not come, and Miss Severoid was a hazy figure that swayed uncertainly, clutching at the soggy rim of her helmet, trying to free her head from its imprisonment.

She was wondering, not without cause, if all the tree had fallen yet.

Plymouth's expression of doubt was funny to look upon, but the rain did not allow his senses to remain numb very long, and in a few moments he was at McClure's side, gripping his sleeve again and whispering hoarsely:

"Be all ri'. No man live. All man go. Mishun lady hurt li'l bit, I t'ink."

McClure's revolver went back into its holster very slowly and his left hand covered his eyes. They were stinging as though on fire, and he was quite sure he would never see again.

"All right. Go help mission lady. I'm all right."

Plymouth obeyed gingerly. He was a little afraid

of the beautiful white lady, who, however, did not look very beautiful just then.

Her shoes, once white, were now a bluish-gray and spotted generously with mud; her skirt hung in shapeless, bedraggled disorder, and her white linen blouse was a soggy, starchy pulp. The rain streamed down her face and dripped from her nose and chin, and her hair hung in straggling, wet wisps over her ears. The helmet, badly dented by Ilora's blow and jammed tightly over her ears, added the final touch of pathos —or humor—to her unhappy state.

But Plymouth quickly relieved her of the helmet, and as she threatened to fall as a result of the wrench and the dizziness she had been fighting against for several minutes, the Kroo-boy held her upright and led her back into the welcome support and protection of McClure's arm.

"What happened?" she whispered, clinging to his coat as they moved hopelessly on again.

"I don't know," McClure returned, trying to speak as indifferently as possible. "Somebody with a grievance to air, I fancy. Isn't the rain easing up a little?"

"I think so. How far have we walked? It must be miles."

"Possibly. I am sorry Plymouth is such a bushman. We must just go on till we strike something. You are very tired, aren't you?"

"N-no. Not very. I haven't had a chance to think about being tired. Do your eyes hurt very badly?"

"Not much. They'll be all right in a minute or two. I think the thunder is becoming fainter, don't you?"

"Yes. I think so."

Which was true enough. But the downpour continued steadily for an hour after that, and they wallowed on through the muddy clay, floundering along paths that demanded single file, but which, because of

McClure's helplessness, they had to squeeze through together—always searching for a sign of habitation, till a sheltering roof seemed to be the rarest commodity in the world.

Then the rain stopped and the darkness gave way to the dazzling light of the midday sun. Bird and beast, and all things that crawled or flew, came to life again to the accompaniment of a riot of discordant sounds. Miss Severoid quickly saw more snakes than she cared to count.

Though the sun's heat helped to dry her clothing, it also made her very thirsty; and after being buffeted about by the rain and made dizzy by Ilora's blow, she was not in the fittest condition to combat the humidity that followed.

Her throat and tongue were ready to crack and her feet burned and blistered till she limped a little. There was a dully persistent pain at the back of her head, and she felt uncomfortably drowsy and chilly, too, in spite of the intense heat.

She would have given much to have been able to sit down. But there was nowhere to sit; nothing to do but to go on and on, endlessly it seemed, over lumpy, ribbonlike paths that made her wince at every step and tore her clothing and her optimism to shreds at the same time.

They met no one. At that time of the day—one o'clock—the Beni does not walk abroad any more than he can help. He sleeps.

Stumbling along with a wet handkerchief over his eyes, McClure could feel Miss Severoid limp. The little lurch she gave at every step became more and more pronounced, till at last he stopped.

"Why, what's wrong?" she asked at once, standing on one foot and leaning heavily against him; while Plymouth, whose only anxiety seemed to be the lumps

Ilora's mango stick had raised on his head, also halted and looked inquiringly up into his master's face.

"You are tired," McClure declared very deliberately. "And you are limping worse and worse every minute. I am going to carry you."

"Carry me!" Miss Severoid laughed oddly.

"Exactly." He stooped a little. "You are not very heavy; but don't make yourself heavier by resisting. Put your arm round my neck."

Miss Severoid's smile was wan and undecided. She felt queer—chilly, and half inclined to go to sleep where she stood.

"B-but you can't see!" she protested. "And—"

"Plymouth can," McClure retorted tersely, and in a second had lifted her in his arms with an ease and swiftness that was as surprising as it was comfortable.

"Oh—pl-please! I—"

"Go on, Plymouth."

Plymouth obeyed without a comment of any sort. He did not even grin, and as Miss Severoid's arm crept round McClure's neck, silence reigned again.

They plodded on, groping in a maze that seemed to have no beginning or end, time and again wheeling to the right.

Miss Severoid's sensations were mixed. The comfort and strength and safety of McClure's arms were intimate factors of her immediate existence that made her forget the majority of her minor miseries—all of them, in fact, but the dull pain in the back of her head and the queer chills that attacked her spine.

Her head slipped down upon McClure's shoulder, and in the heavier drowsiness that was creeping over her she had vague thoughts of love and malaria and Clavering and Benin City, all of which were hopelessly mixed and unintelligible.

But her arm tightened its grip about McClure's neck, and, having very little understanding of what she did, she clung to him in a manner that made him gasp and wonder and pray silently to be able to see her face.

Then, as Plymouth swung hopefully into a broader path than any they had yet encountered, a violent chill seized Miss Severoid, and, quivering from head to foot, her teeth chattered quite audibly.

McClure halted.

"Chilly?" he asked, trying to conceal his anxiety.

And Miss Severoid heard him as though his voice came to her from a great distance out of a very black night.

"N-no—just a little. I'll be—all—right—soon," she whispered as she drifted, chalky white and blue of lip, into a welcome oblivion.

McClure stood quite still. He could not see, but he could feel her added weight, and he suffered the torment of the damned in the silence that followed.

Then Plymouth was clutching his arm excitedly and saying hoarsely:

"White man live, sah! I look him! T'ree minute pass, we go catch him!"

Which was true.

About a hundred yards along the path a gentleman in immaculate white flannels, a dark red *cummerbund* and a turbaned helmet, stood beside a bundle of some sort, prodding it in lazy inquiry with the toe of a spotless white buckskin boot.

The gentleman's name was Clavering.

And the bundle was the pack Cralla's luckless carrier had left behind.

Plymouth had completed the circle.

CHAPTER XIX

DISCIPLINE

CLAVERING was studying the pack as though he did not care very much whether its presence there was explained or not. But as he flicked a few specks of cigarette ash from the lapel of his coat he raised his head and saw the strange little company that came slowly toward him.

The languid air left him instantly. For once in his life, at least, he was evidently at a loss to know how to meet the situation. There was a trace of anxiety in his face, too; an anxiety that made him go forward to meet McClure, who, because his limp burden occupied all the attention of his arms, could not indulge a very natural inclination to tear the handkerchief from his eyes so that he might learn, if he could, the identity of the white man to whom Plymouth had referred.

Though the Kroo-boy had heard about Clavering, he had never seen him; and when the outlaw halted a few paces away to take stock of the sightless McClure and to glance anxiously into Miss Severoid's face, Plymouth shuffled to a stop and eyed the stranger hopefully.

Clavering waited a second or two.

"What's the trouble?" McClure growled. "What are you stopping for? Where's the white man? Holler, you bushman! Holler!"

"No need, Mac," Clavering interposed in a low voice, and saw McClure straighten sharply and take a firmer hold upon Miss Severoid's sagging weight. "Can you manage as far as Basanna? It's almost a mile."

McClure grunted derisively, though his arms were numbed to a sensation of brittleness and felt as if they would snap at any moment. Having recognized Clavering's smooth voice at once, the incongruity of the situation was not lost upon him.

"Thanks. Go on. I'll manage."

The cigarette between Clavering's lips drooped a little, and the indifferent smile he essayed was not a success.

With a very terse "All right," and no more than that, he turned abruptly and led the wanderers toward Basanna.

Walking upon McClure's left, his gaze became fixed upon the dent in Miss Severoid's helmet, and he examined it as though he were trying to connect it in some way with the pallor of her cheeks.

"What happened to your eyes, Mac?" he asked casually, when they had gone about fifty yards. "Sun hit them?"

McClure kept on as though he had not heard. Considering that both he and Miss Severoid were hopelessly at the mercy of any devilment that Clavering chose to conceive, and remembering a vivid occasion on which he had held the outlaw's neck in jeopardy, the latter's magnanimous attitude was rather difficult to understand.

"I'll talk later," the trader answered shortly. "I need all the breath I've got just now."

Clavering's eyes did not leave Miss Severoid's face, not even when he forced himself to laugh at McClure's dogged candor, nor when the patter of running feet heralded the approach of Ilora from the direction of Basanna.

She was running toward them, evidently very anxious about the health of her mistress.

"Be Miss Sev'roi' maid, sah," Plymouth announced

hopefully, and Clavering, looking up, shouted at the girl in Jackrie, so that she stopped and instantly sped back the way she had come.

Clavering continued to examine the dent in Miss Severoid's helmet. His brows were knitted in a thoughtful frown, and his glance, lifting lazily, he looked straight ahead in the direction in which Ilora had gone.

There was nothing definite in that look. He was thinking only of the fact that Ilora had deserted her mistress and had thereby given McClure the opportunity to play the role of hero.

But his fingers twitched nervously and suggestively, his face assumed a graying hue, and the smile upon his lips did not belong to earth or heaven.

In a remarkably short space of time—just as they had squeezed their way into the bush path leading to Basanna—Ilora came racing back to meet them, followed by the hammock-bearers; and McClure being satisfied that everything was all right, relinquished Miss Severoid into their care.

A few short, sharp words from Clavering sent Ilora and the hammock-bearers on ahead, and ere McClure had reached the haven of a comparatively cool and dark hut, Miss Severoid was in bed—McClure's camp bed this time—struggling back to consciousness with the assistance of Ilora and a wizened old mammy who did not know a thermometer from a quinin pill, but who knew how to do as she was told.

Clavering hung back in the shadows, giving soft-voiced instructions, and there were no interruptions or intrusions of any kind. No one came to the door inquisitively to discover what was going on; not even Chief Mora himself. The chief of Basanna knew Clavering's displeasure too well for that.

There was no sign of Cralla. His boys were hud-

dled in a shady corner of Mora's compound, most of them fast asleep, while the rest lolled about, happy in the knowledge that they would not have to work until the "white mammy" got well again.

No one could have said that the Beni village of Basanna was other than abominably filthy. And it smelled vilely. All Beni villages do.

A Beni never washes anything—himself included. For the greater part, he is a lazy, dirty, treacherous beast; a disgusting, disease-ridden spawn of barbarity, with a gluttonous passion for the sight of other men's blood. He eats, sleeps, and crawls through his miserable life to a grave in an open ditch.

His chiefs are as gods; and though Chief Mora was a pretty miserable sort of god—being a shrunken, sniveling, parasitic old sinner who lived in hourly terror of the death that was crawling up on to his shoulders and clutching him about the throat, and who would sell his brother for a bottle of gin—yet his people bowed their necks under his yoke just as submissively as though he were as big and powerful and as terrible as the great Daka of Benin City.

Consequently, because Mora's fear of Clavering descended to his people, Basanna was very quiet, and the hut in which Miss Severoid lay was sacred ground.

McClure's was next door. There were but a few yards of space between them, but whereas McClure's hut was a small one, Miss Severoid's was large enough to be converted into two rooms with the assistance of native mats strung together and hung from the ceiling.

The camp bed had been erected in the inner room, and some mats were strewn upon the earthen floor. Two camp-chairs had been carried in and a medicine-chest lay upon one of them.

Clavering remained in the shadows, watching Ilora's ministrations with a hawklike eye. And she knew he

was watching her. Her movements were nervous and her knees trembled.

That Clavering had not asked her why she had deserted her mistress was an ominous circumstance; so ominous that Ilora began to doubt the possible effectiveness of the plausible excuse she had invented. Her mind scurried frantically about for another, seized upon several, and jumbled them up in chaotic confusion.

Miss Severoid's eyes opened wearily. There was no life or understanding in them.

"It's no use," she murmured sadly at no one in particular, with the gray film over her senses and vision not yet lifted. "You can't carry me—like this—forever. And my head is wabbling so."

Her dull gold head rolled restlessly on the pillows.

"And your eyes are hurting you, too. Please let me down and—I'll—try—to walk."

The whispering voice died away in a low, restless moan. Over Clavering's cheek-bones the skin was drawn tight as a drum, and his head craned forward a little. Ilora and the aged mammy stood together at the foot of the bed, and the beady eyes of the old woman were fixed upon the patient. But Ilora was watching Clavering.

An eternity seemed to pass before Miss Severoid's voice came again in husky appeal.

"Why don't you let me down? Your arms must be breaking and your poor eyes—they hurt terribly, don't they?" A pause. "I do wish my head wouldn't wabble so. I think my helmet's crooked, and I'm afraid of the sun." Another pause. "Do you really think it was a man who hit me so hard? I thought it was a tree falling. If I hadn't had on my helmet I'd have been killed, and that would be mean, wouldn't it, after coming so far?" A pitiful little smile curved her

pallid lips, and she looked straight into the shadows at Clavering, but with a blank stare that told him she did not see. "But I'm a baby to bother you like this. You've been so good to me—so patient and trustful and—and—oh, I wonder what you'll think when you *know?*"

Her arms struggled from beneath the covers as though she might be trying to wriggle out of McClure's grasp, and, raising her head a little, she fought desperately for a few minutes till, the gray film lifting all at once, she started up, to look wildly about her, trying to understand.

"Wh-where is he?"

Not "Where am I?" but "Where is he?"

Clavering winced and shut his teeth very tightly. But as he tiptoed into the light and toward the bedside his face betrayed nothing more than a welcoming smile that tried to be an assurance of good faith.

"He is next door doctoring his eyes," he said gently. "And you are in Basanna and in good hands. But I think you'd better lie down again and put your arms under the covers or you may get chilled."

And as Miss Severoid stared at him in blank astonishment and not a little fear and confusion, he turned to Ilora, muttering a low order in Jackrie which made the girl approach the bed instantly and tuck the covers tightly about the patient so that they hugged her chin.

Then the girl, with a furtive glance at Clavering, shuffled into the background again, while the wizened old mammy, mumbling to herself and grinning meaninglessly, watched the outlaw bend over the medicine-chest.

He was passionless, to all appearances, as a knife blade. Producing a clinical thermometer he jerked the mercury down to normal.

The shock of seeing him again so suddenly had

cleared Miss Severoid's head as quickly as a cold douche might have done. The dark-red *cummerbund* about his waist held her attention like a magnet. The expression upon her face was that of a child groping fearfully, yet hopefully, out of a goblin-filled dream to the dawn of another day.

"Hold this under your tongue a minute," she heard Clavering say, and he loomed over her very suddenly. "I am not much of a doctor, but I think I can read one of these things."

Miss Severoid smiled and obediently closed her lips upon the thermometer. Yet she had never been so much afraid of anything as she was of Clavering just then. The power of his personality seemed to combat her efforts to get a firm mental grip upon her situation, and to feel herself slipping into a sort of trancelike submission to his will was, under the circumstances, a terrifying sensation.

In the minute or two of silence that followed she could hear the village awakening from its sweltering mid-day slumbers, but the sounds were subdued as though the order to talk in whispers had gone abroad.

Clavering strolled to the doorway, looked out for a little while, then returned. His glance fell upon Ilora for a second and her flesh shivered away from it as from a lash.

"Please," he said gently to Miss Severoid, and his hand went out for the thermometer which her lips released at once. "I don't think you are so bad as I thought at first."

In a moment, however, he learned that her temperature was a fraction above 104 degrees. But his face did not show it. He smiled with an "I told you so" air and said lightly:

"Oh, that isn't bad. Does your head hurt very much?"

"N-no—not very. It feels—swimmy."

"Any sharp, stabbing sort of pains at the nape of the neck?" Clavering was thinking of the dented helmet and the sun.

"No, just a dull, miserable sort of ache, and—and I'm cold—then very warm—like influenza, only worse. What's my temperature?"

"A fraction over a hundred," Clavering lied easily. "But you've got to be very quiet and take all the powders and things we give you."

He smiled again, and, turning to Ilora and her wizened assistant, rattled off several orders in Jackrie which they hastened to obey with all possible speed—particularly Ilora, who was chilled to the marrow of her bones by the promise of what was to come.

Clavering busied himself, too, measuring out phenacetin powders with the accuracy of a chemist, and Miss Severoid, shivering convulsively and biting her lips, watched him and wondered if the thoughts and fancies that were surging through her mind were not more fever than fact.

And then the drowsiness came to her again. She had a dim understanding of drinking something very hot and sour, and of falling back upon the pillows exhausted with the effort. The hazy figure of Clavering, seated on a camp chair beside the bed, seemed to follow her into the gloom—his burning black eyes and gleaming teeth particularly—and she saw him in a hundred guises as she tossed restlessly in semiconsciousness beneath the sweltering pack of blankets.

McClure did not appear in any of the pictures. He had drifted into the background behind Clavering's dominating personality which dwarfed all other things. But the outlaw, watching Miss Severoid's forehead for the first sign of perspiration, could not be expected to know that. Consequently his expression was rather

hard, more particularly when he turned his head to glance at Ilora who lay upon a mat immediately under the square hole in the wall that served for a window.

Each time he looked in her direction he found her watching him, and each time their eyes met the girl would shrink and her body would creep shudderingly away from the promise in his.

Then he rose very quietly, went over to Miss Severoid's small uniform case and, picking up the battered helmet which lay on top, returned to his chair by the bed, passing the tips of his fingers over the patient's forehead as he did so. It was still hot and dry.

Clavering's lips twitched a little, and he held the helmet in his hands between his knees, staring fixedly at the jagged dent in it as though he were trying to read the story it told.

Then his glance shot toward Ilora again suddenly.

"No be me!" she whimpered instantly, the denial of her guilt forced from her in the belief that Clavering was connecting her in some way with the dent in the helmet. "No be me! Be 'nother man. Be—"

She stopped—instantly aware of the fact that she had made a mistake, and the glistening ebony of her cheeks became the color of dirty gray ashes.

Clavering did not speak nor move. But his face was no longer the face of a man, but of a pale-yellow fiend whose eyes blazed like living coals and whose lips were drawn back from his teeth in a hideous, wolfish grin.

And Ilora, shrinking yet obedient to the command in his glance, writhed and twisted her way across the floor to his feet, where she lay shivering like a whipped puppy looking up at him in terrorized appeal.

There was a long and painful silence.

Clavering was shaking perceptibly with the violence of his inhuman passion, but it was evident after a

minute or two that he was victorious in the struggle to master it. The ghastly grin faded slowly, and then the death-light in his eyes flickered for a little while and went out.

Stretching forth a hand that visibly trembled he again passed the tips of his fingers over Miss Severoid's forehead and found it slightly moist. His fingers lingered for a moment or two, and the touch seemed to steady him and bring about a cold, emotionless calm.

When he looked down at Ilora again there was not a particle of feeling in his face.

"This time—be flog palaver. Next time—"

Ilora understood perfectly, and she threw her arms about his knees and paid homage to the soles of his shoes, groveling at his feet in savage ecstasy at her escape from the death of a bush-dog.

"Cralla come—to-night," Clavering said, thrusting her from him with an unceremonious toe. "Bring the quinin."

He was himself again.

All afternoon, attended by the tireless Plymouth, McClure lay upon mats in the darkest corner of his hut, silently praying for the power to see.

There were wet bandages over his swollen, bloodshot eyes, and the darting pains had been alleviated a little; but he was sure that both pupils had been irretrievably damaged.

A man may lose a limb and laugh; but threaten his eyesight and he will probably whine.

McClure did not whine, partly because he was not built that way, but greatly because he did not wish to give Clavering the satisfaction of hearing him. So he bit upon his pains and his dread and spent most of his time wondering what the upshot of it all would be.

Plymouth told him where Miss Severoid was lodged, how she was being cared for, and that she had a touch of malaria but was speedily reducing her temperature in copious perspiration.

Clavering came in about five in the afternoon and, confirming Plymouth's bulletins, asked with some concern:

"How are the eyes, Mac? Any better?"

McClure writhed. His was not a pleasant situation. Clavering's magnanimity had an edge like a razor-blade.

"Thanks. A little better."

"Good. Miss Severoid won't be ready to move for two or three days, so you'll have plenty of time to get into shape. I've just had a talk with Cralla, and he told me all about it. He's very apologetic and very much scared that you'll fill him full of lead when you can see to do it. So I've sent him on ahead to keep him out of harm and to pave the way a bit. He'll meet you at Mayona again, and you'll need him, you know, however much you may want to strip the hide off him. So you'd better hold back the eye-for-an-eye part of the program till his usefulness is past. Then you can do as you please."

McClure made no reply. Clavering's tone was too friendly and too altogether matter-of-fact to be the true expression of his feelings; and had McClure been aware of the truth that the outlaw had just come from Miss Severoid's hut—that he had been there all afternoon—and that Cralla had not been seen in Basanna since the rain began, the trader would have had still more cause to question Clavering's sincerity.

Of Miss Severoid's intentions, or of the object of the expedition, nothing was said. Clavering stayed only a few minutes and departed, expressing the hope that McClure's eyes would very soon be all right again,

so that he could see for himself "how well Miss Severoid is being cared for."

The trader did not reply to the final thrust; but his jaws bulged perceptibly, and Clavering went out—smiling.

When darkness came McClure, for his eyes' sake, welcomed it.

But Ilora didn't.

Late that night, while Miss Severoid slept and the wizened old mammy lay on a mat near the bed, peering at her patient in the dim light of a small oil lamp, Chief Cralla appeared in the doorway.

Clavering had gone over to Mora's hut an hour before.

There was a hippo-hide thong coiled about the chief's right hand, and in his face there was a hint of the fact that he was going to enjoy himself.

"Ilora, *wah!*"

The girl's flesh quivered at the sound, but she shuffled obediently to her feet and went quietly out at the chief's heels into the darkness.

And presently there came to McClure's waking ears the sound of low, whining moans; no more than that, though a hippo-thong cuts like a knife.

Cralla was enjoying himself.

Then some time later Ilora crawled to her mat on the floor of Miss Severoid's hut and lay flat upon her face. Her back was raw.

The wizened old mammy saw her there, twisting silently in her pain, but she merely shrugged her shrunken shoulders and rolled over into a dreamless sleep. It was none of her business.

Clavering had to have discipline. And Cralla did the dirty work.

CHAPTER XX

AN INTRUSION

THE following morning, as one wet bandage was giving way to another, McClure found that he could keep his eyelids open long enough to see—just a little. But it was in the late afternoon of the fourth day before he had the courage, even with the aid of a palm leaf shaped into an eye-shade, to dare the light again.

In the interval Clavering had been an ideal host.

To Miss Severoid he had been courteous and gentle in the extreme. If young Debenham's exact relationship to her bothered him at all, he asked no questions about it; nor when she was convalescent did he take advantage of the situation to annoy her with such attentions as, in Segwanga, he had risked his neck to thrust upon her.

Miss Severoid was not sure whether his restraint and his somewhat Chesterfieldian attitude was a pose or a reformation, but sometimes, when he looked at her, she thought she could hear his eyes say:

"You are in the cup of my hand. I can do as I please. But—that will come later."

Which, naturally enough, made her very dubious about the future, and made her feel, still more keenly, the need of McClure's protection.

So far as the trader was concerned, Clavering had not shown a trace of animosity; in fact, had not troubled him at all, except to look into his hut each morning to ask cheerily and thoughtfully about his eyes,

which made McClure's temper about as smooth as a rasp.

Basanna had remained as peaceful as an English village in the dog-days; and nothing could have proved Clavering's peculiar power more than the manner in which Chief Mora and his people refrained from intruding upon the privacy of the village's guests. McClure, who understood these things, marveled and ruminated very dubiously at the same time.

That Clavering had a plan of some sort in mind the trader did not doubt for a moment; and he was quite convinced that it was not a pretty one. There was some particularly refined deviltry behind it all—something that would make the hospitality of Basanna a sardonic mockery.

However, McClure was grateful for the opportunity given him to regain his sight, and when, even with the improvised eye-shade, he could look along the glittering barrel of his .45 caliber and perforate the thick green hide of a coconut at a little over a hundred yards, he felt that there was a fighting chance left to him.

Miss Severoid was actually responsible for the shooting.

Still a trifle weak and shaky, yet laughingly leading McClure from his hut to dare the late afternoon sunshine, she jested at his natural timidity in the face of the light, and the trader, declaring that he was "all right," and boasting wildly that he could see well enough to hit the coconut in question—proved it!

Which startled himself and Miss Severoid considerably, made several half-naked Benis jump and gasp with awe, and brought Clavering to the door of Mora's hut with an oath upon his lips.

Plymouth, who stood behind McClure, grinned the width of his face, and Ilora, in the shadows of Miss Severoid's doorway, drew a long breath of savage joy,

straightened her stiff and aching back and mumbled that her gods were good. In her own way she loved the gigantic trader, greatly because he showed no fear of Clavering; and she was convinced that the speckled lizard she had held captive outside McClure's door was responsible for his recovery.

"He is just testing his eyesight," Miss Severoid called to Clavering, with a little shake in her voice that was also present in her knees as the ordeal of having to face Clavering and McClure together seemed to threaten.

"All right. I'll forgive him," the outlaw returned, smiling pleasantly, but with his eyes carefully fixed upon the trader's smoking revolver. "Better put it away, Mac. Sounds like these are rebellious."

McClure was looking across the space between them heavily, and Miss Severoid was watching him with a somewhat quaking interest.

That was the first time he had ever seen Clavering in daylight, and he appeared to be making the most of his opportunity, while the outlaw, white-flanneled and impossibly clean in the midst of such squalor, returned the distant scrutiny with a mild hint that it might become annoying. But he made no move to approach.

McClure's revolver went back into its holster very slowly.

"Let—let's have some tea," Miss Severoid suggested timidly, and brought his attention from Clavering to herself with a jerk.

"Er—oh, yes—tea—of course! Is he going to—"

"N-no. Just we two—" and glancing swiftly toward Mora's doorway she saw to her infinite relief that Clavering had gone in again. "I'm gasping for a cup."

McClure followed her into the hut, and when Ilora, ordered to bring water, took up a cooler and made a

shuffling exit, he watched her go out with the eye of a cattle-dealer sizing up a steer. Then, looking intently at Miss Severoid, he asked quietly:

"Who has been thrashing that girl?"

"Thrashing her!"

McClure nodded slowly.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. When she picked up that cooler I could see she had been under the influence of hippo-hide—and a lot of it—quite recently. That stiff and jerky straightening of the back is unmistakable. At home we'd call it rheumatism, but among the underdogs out here it's reasonably sure to be hippo-hide. And she fastens her cloth over the shoulders instead of under the arms, so I fancy the marks are fairly well scattered and high."

Miss Severoid was astounded and horrified both.

"You mean that some one has actually thrashed her with one of those terrible whips?"

McClure inclined his head again and moodily studied the native mat at his feet. Clavering's magnanimity still rankled like a jagged barb, and, try as he would, the trader could not associate the outlaw with any sort of charity that did not have an ulterior motive attached.

"How has his lordship been behaving himself?" he asked at last.

"Oh, splendidly!" Miss Severoid answered without a moment's hesitation. "He's been awfully kind. Just like a big brother, and I really cannot believe that he hasn't some good in him. He's queer and uncanny and all that, but he can be as gentle as a woman when he likes. But don't let us talk about him. Sit down and let me look at your eyes. I couldn't see them properly in that dark little place of yours."

McClure eyed one of the camp-chairs a moment dubiously, then risked it. The chair bore the strain

nobly, and Miss Severoid examined his eyes with a soft motherly tenderness that gave him a disagreeable sensation that he was being petted.

"They look terribly painful," she said in a tone that was very, very sorry for them. "Do they hurt much?"

"No—not at all," McClure lied cheerfully. "I—e-er—I think you'd better sit down, don't you? You are not quite yourself yet."

"Wait a minute till I fix this again. I'm not so terribly weak as all that."

She smiled down at him, and though the pallor of her cheeks and the slight fever-born heaviness that hung about her eyes belied her assumption of strength, her smile scattered the lie like chaff.

"There! I think that will stay that way," she said, referring to the palm-leaf eye-shade which she re-adjusted. "Does it feel as if it would?"

"Yes, thanks! Still a little shaky, aren't you?"

He caught her arm gently as she swayed a trifle, and she laughed.

"Just a little. Think you could—carry me—to that chair?"

She reached it before he could move. It was only two yards away, and her low laughter made the dingy, insalubrious hut a drawing-room, and the sordid prospect of the sun-baked compound, littered with filth and Mora's naked children, an English lawn peopled with afternoon idlers in silks and tennis flannels.

"I—er—I hope I did not offend you by carrying you?"

"Offend me! How should I have reached here if you hadn't? And I—I want to say how much I—"

"Don't do that. It was my fool of a boy's fault. And I really should apologize to you for all the misery his blundering has given you. He's a good boy—

faithful as a sheep-dog, but without that animal's brains." A pause. "You are still determined to go through with this?"

"Yes," very quietly.

"And this sort of thing"—a sweep of his hand embraced Basanna and the bush and the perils of sickness and accident—"doesn't frighten you?"

"No. I expected it, and it will probably be worse."

The tightening of McClure's lips agreed with her, and there followed a short, awkward quiet. Miss Severoid trifled with a dainty handkerchief, and McClure, glimpsing a rude and cruel wrestling match through the window, watched it abstractedly till the taller of the two contestants slipped and fell, to the shrill-voiced enjoyment of a few greasy-looking spectators.

"You trust Clavering implicitly, then?"

Miss Severoid hesitated and glanced quickly about her.

"I'm not sure," she whispered. "Though goodness knows he's been good as gold to me here. No one could have been kinder or more gentle, and—and—oh, I can't make him out at all! He's so queer sometimes, and that beast Cralla seems to be like his right arm. One can't ever be sure of what he is going to do next. Did he say anything to you about where Cralla had gone?"

"Mayona, I believe. The chief is to meet us there. It's only half a day away."

"Is Mr. Clavering going with us to Mayona?"

"He didn't say."

"You don't feel as if you'd like to shoot him, do you?"

McClure laughed shortly, and his hand, straying absently to his revolver, came slowly away again.

"Under the circumstances, I'm afraid not."

"Don't you really think he has been very good to us?"

"Um—yes—I suppose so."

"You don't say that very enthusiastically." She regarded McClure for a little while dubiously. "You—you're not sorry for anything, are you?"

"Sorry!" McClure rose, stretching his great limbs. "No, not at all. I'm at sea about most of what it's all about, but still I'm rather thankful for some things."

"Such as?"

"Being able to see you again."

He said it quite calmly—so calmly that Miss Severoid wondered if he had said it at all.

"Thank you," very quietly, and looking quickly out of the window was just in time to glimpse Cralla's head man vanishing into the bush with a black, tarpaulin-covered carrier's pack on his back. "But I thought you left that sort of thing to—the others."

"I meant that."

Miss Severoid laughed softly and glanced swiftly upward. She had not recognized either the head man or the pack.

"Don't you want to sit down, or is that camp-chair too low?"

McClure looked down at her very seriously, his head bent forward a little, his arms hanging easily by his sides.

"You are the most wonderful woman I've ever known. Whether I love you or not I can't say, because I've had no practical experience in analyzing these things. But I want you more than I ever wanted anything, and—well—I'd just like to know if it's any use—hoping. May I?"

Miss Severoid's smile faded, and she did not blush. She looked frightened—shrinkingly so, as though Mc-

Clure's peculiar and deliberate proposal had been a blow.

Then she laughed again—a strange, whimsical little ripple that sounded hollow.

"You—I—please don't." She looked up at him in timid appeal. "I—I thought you wouldn't—wouldn't ever be—like that. You mustn't, because I—I can't—I—oh, *please!*"

She bent her head suddenly, covering her face with her hands, and McClure, though he felt the temperature drop all at once and the world sink and slip from beneath his feet, made no sound.

The buzz and the scattering shrieks of Beni village life had died away and a strange quiet had settled over compound and hut. But McClure did not take note of these things then. He was thinking of how lucky Ralph Debenham had been and of how little the "young fool" had appreciated it; and from that moment McClure eliminated himself, blotted out his dreams and turned his face toward the future without whining and without a single word of pleading or a question as to the whole truth.

"That—er—that's all right," he said, breaking a seemingly interminable silence and scarcely recognizing his own voice. "My fault. Sorry I—"

Just then the sound of a scuffling foot came into the shadows of the doorway and Ilora looked in—just a moment.

"Gov'ment come!" she announced raspingly as McClure swiftly turned his head; and then she slipped away again as though she did not care whether he heard or not.

"Wh-what is it?" Miss Severoid whispered and started instantly to her feet.

There was a look of hopefulness on McClure's face. He was glad the government had come. It was time

some one or something came to put an end to the insane project.

"I don't know," he answered. "Some one said the government had come, and I suppose that means—we can't go on."

"Can't—"

Miss Severoid's slender figure became stiff and taut in a second. Her mouth twisted queerly and tightened, and the flashing lights that sprang into her eyes were those of some wild thing upon whose heart terror had set its clutch.

"They mustn't stop us! They mustn't! I won't go back! I—I—where is Clav—"

McClure's hand went over her mouth most unceremoniously.

Lieutenant Maybrick, of Saloko, accompanied by two khaki-clad Yoruba orderlies, came into the doorway.

CHAPTER XXI

BETRAYED

McClure fumbled with his soft collar, then with his belt; squared his shoulders and let them sag again—pulled nervously upon his mustache and gave the general impression that he did not know what to do with himself.

Lieutenant Maybrick—tall, clean-shaven, with a somewhat weak mouth, and radiating a suggestion of boyishness in spite of his command and his thirty-odd years—stood with his helmet in his hand, considering Miss Severoid's pale face and the smile that broke through her first look of fear, as if he did not know just how to meet it.

The Yorubas behind him were apparently oblivious of everything but the nape of their officer's neck; and beyond them Basanna was as quiet as a graveyard at night. But a company of sphinx-faced Yorubas, armed with rifles that are known to be capable of killing at a thousand yards, usually has that quieting effect upon such noxious sores as Basanna was upon the earth's surface.

And in those troublous days, when Clavering was at the zenith of his power, standing the name of government on its head—before there was a police department at Saloko, or any other department save the D. C.'s office, those khaki-clad little brown men did most of the work in counteracting Clavering's baleful influence upon the rude Delta native, and in impressing

the latter with his first conception of government. In the Beni country, where Clavering was known to be exceptionally powerful, they were as necessary to an officer as his tooth-brush.

But Lieutenant Maybrick almost forgot he had them when he became aware of the fact that Miss Severoid had eyes—velvet-blue eyes that did not flinch, but instead looked straight at him in a soft, steady, appealing sort of way that made it very difficult to be an officer rather than a man.

"Er—that is—hello, Maybrick!" McClure managed to say at last. "Come in. Allow me to introduce you to Miss Severoid. Miss Severoid, this is Lieutenant Maybrick, of Saloko—a power in the state. Lieutenant Maybrick—Miss Severoid."

McClure's forcedly easy tone startled the lieutenant somewhat. It was not in the least what he had expected. Neither was Miss Severoid.

In Saloko, when the news of the "elopement" came through from Segwanga per runner, it created quite a stir, and because the district commissioner at Saloko had never basked in the sunshine of Miss Severoid's smiles, he became extremely active in his efforts to discover if the runaways had come north—within his district.

A colored government hireling, bent upon an evening's debauch, visited the village of Okanna, where the launch *Rover* was in hiding, and stumbling upon the launch's colored engineer, John, forgot his intention to get drunk and thought of promotion. He knew John, and a little while later he found the *Rover* and a large, forty-paddle canoe—which information he carried to the district commissioner post-haste.

After that the trail was comparatively easy to follow, particularly when John was threatened with sudden extinction if he did not speak out.

John spoke out—all he knew—which was the "Benin City road."

That was enough—and a little more, because the D. C. could not conceive of any one eloping along the Benin City road.

"Mad! McClure's crazy! Good Lord! Poor little woman—among those beasts! They'll—oh, hell! Orderly!"

Within a few hours Lieutenant Maybrick, with a company of Yorubas to lend a moral effect, had started off in pursuit of the "mad McClure"—with orders to "bring him and the poor woman back. But don't shoot him unless you think it will save time and trouble afterward."

Consequently the lieutenant, into whose hands the four-days' delay at Basanna had played very conveniently, found the mad McClure's attitude rather astonishing. The trader did not look at all mad, though the palm-leaf eye-shade gave him a curious appearance; and Miss Severoid bore no resemblance to the "poor woman" the lieutenant's imagination had pictured.

So he hesitated in awkward indecision, trying to adjust his mind to conditions.

"Are you not going to shake hands with me?" Miss Severoid asked sweetly.

"Oh—er—I beg your pardon," Maybrick stammered, and came instantly forward to accept the invitation, finding as he did so that Miss Severoid's hand was different somehow from any other. He could not explain it, but the touch of her fingers and the soft look in her eyes seemed to mother him and make him feel, as he expressed it to himself—"like a damned fool!"

McClure watched but did not wonder. He had seen other men look as Maybrick looked then when their

eyes encountered Miss Severoid's for the first time.

"What are you doing away up here?" she asked the lieutenant naïvely, moving toward one of the camp-chairs. "I think you had better sit down, too. You look very tired."

Maybrick was ill at ease and did not accept the proffered chair.

"If it's anything you would like to say to me—" McClure began significantly.

"No. I want to hear it," Miss Severoid broke in hurriedly. "It can't be so dreadful as all that. What is it, lieutenant? You are not going to handcuff me, are you?"

"Er—eh—well—no—hardly that." Maybrick tried to smile and failed. "You—er—you see, you have no permit, and—well—the government doesn't allow—that is—it doesn't allow—well—I mean—"

"That the government doesn't allow an unmarried woman to roam about the country unless accompanied by a parent or properly appointed guardian?" Miss Severoid completed in a very gentle voice. "I know all that. But this is different—so very different. You'd think so, too, if you were lying in a slave compound in Benin City waiting for some one to come and take you out."

Maybrick's eyebrows rose and fell. So did McClure's; and he was more accustomed than the lieutenant to Miss Severoid's practise of thrusting the most startling information at one in the most matter-of-fact way—a method that instantly seized upon one's interest and led one to believe that the rest of the story would follow just as easily.

Which, as he knew, it didn't.

The lieutenant looked back from Miss Severoid to McClure, then back again, and his eyes became two sharp interrogation points.

"You mean—you are going to Benin City?"

"M-hm—oh—I mean, yes! Is it so very terrible?"

And Maybrick's glance turned slowly upon McClure—so queerly and so significantly that the trader winced. He knew that the lieutenant was wondering whether he were mad—or just an unscrupulous hound who had led Miss Severoid into the Beni country upon a quest he had no intention of completing.

In short, Maybrick was thinking of McClure—what McClure had thought of Clavering.

"You seem to know the Beni country pretty well," the lieutenant drawled pointedly. "And they treat you like a brother. As a rule that means—"

He stopped as though something very serious had dawned upon him, and wheeling sharply he snapped an order at the two Yorubas to stand guard over the door, then slipped between them out into the compound.

Followed a babel of sounds—sharp orders in English and the whimper and whine of scattering Benis as the company of Yorubas broke their line formation and dived in twos and threes into the squalid huts round about them—like dogs who had caught the scent.

They went through Basanna as with a fine-tooth comb, searching for guns or powder or other forbidden fruit that Lieutenant Maybrick had hastily concluded McClure must have paid to Chief Mora for the hospitality they had received.

Only these things, at that time, could safely purchase the Benis' friendship. They were the things that money could not buy.

Clavering had originally inoculated them with a preference for modern firearms; had shown their chiefs what a Winchester could do and what a muzzle-loader couldn't—which made them very much dissatis-

fied with the muzzle-loader and the namby-pamby gifts the white traders sometimes threw their way. So that when a trader and a chief were suspiciously friendly the government was prone to conclude that the trader had been emulating Clavering's example.

And the Yorubas found a Winchester and a Martini-Henry—a few muzzle-loaders, several rounds of ammunition, several kegs of powder, and several more of lead-shot—all in Mora's quarters.

Standing at the window Miss Severoid watched the ominous operations of the Yorubas, quite unconscious of McClure's danger, but growing colder and colder, till it seemed as if an icy hand had seized upon her heart and was squeezing it dry of life and hope and everything that mattered.

She did not speak or make any sound, and she was hardly aware of McClure's large and silent presence behind her. The Yorubas in the doorway and the sniveling group of Beni women huddled in one corner of Mora's compound were misty quantities that had little to do with the tense anxiety she felt—on Clavering's account; that same anxiety she had experienced when she had pictured him cooped up in Rama's compound at Saganna.

She did not even observe that Cralla's boys had disappeared—packs and all together; nor did she realize that most of the male population of Basanna had taken flight.

Of the expedition party only Plymouth remained. Ilora had also gone. There was not a Jackrie in sight.

"Where is Clavering?"

Her mind repeated the question over and over again, and it was upon occasions like this that she realized how desperately she relied upon his help and how impotent her efforts would be without him.

And now, she was asking herself, what she would

do if he were caught? Or, even if he were not, what he could do for her in the teeth of those terrible, khaki-clad little men who seemed to have been born to the business of killing, and who would only be too glad to wipe Basanna and Clavering out of existence?

McClure also watched in silence. He knew what had been in Maybrick's mind the moment he had left the hut; and he knew what the discovery of arms and ammunition would mean to him. It meant that he would be taken back to Saloko and tried upon the charge of high treason for having furnished Mora with munitions of war; and that, unless he could substantially prove himself innocent, he would most assuredly be deported for trial in England; might even be most ignominiously hanged by the Nigerian authorities, since Clavering's practise of the offense had elevated it to a capital one and had made the powers that were steely-eyed about it.

The charge was ridiculous, of course; but the unfortunate circumstance was that, so far as McClure could see just then, he could not produce a single witness who was not, technically at least, an accomplice.

Miss Severoid, having no "fixed or authorized occupation," was actually a vagrant, and subject to immediate deportation. If Cralla were caught he would be arraigned alongside McClure and would run the serious risk of attaching himself to a chain gang for the rest of his natural life.

Chief Mora might declare, upon the threat of pains and penalties, who had actually supplied him with the arms and ammunition. But no Beni had ever turned upon Clavering and lived; so that the old chief of Basanna was between two fires and would not be in the least likely to return.

Further, it was imperative that Clavering's name be kept out of the affair, for while there was an excel-

lent chance that McClure's previous reputation might have considerable weight with the Nigerian authorities to the extent that he would probably escape the extreme penalty and simply be deported, the fact that he had been in Basanna in Clavering's company would, if it were known, jar his "previous reputation" completely off its pedestal and lead him to the nearest mango tree.

McClure quickly grasped these salient features of his predicament while he watched the busy little brown men running in and out of Basanna's huts. Then, studying the dull gold of Miss Severoid's hair, he wondered what *she* would do.

The velvet touch of her hands and the magnetism in her voice and eyes and lips had drawn him from beaten paths to the very edge of a precipice. His usefulness, so far as she was concerned, was over. There were but two courses open to him; to submit to arrest and the ignominy of what awaited him at Saloko, or to resist capture and be decently shot.

But he wondered, in either event, what Miss Severoid would do.

The stiffness and the tensity of her attitude, combined with her silence, told him quite plainly that she had no intention of turning back, even at the muzzles of the Yoruba rifles; and he knew, too, that she had no understanding of his own situation.

"Nuisance, isn't it?" he hazarded finally.

Miss Severoid did not move for almost a minute; then she turned her head very slowly.

"I wonder where he went to?" she whispered, and did not realize how much anxiety there was in her face and tone.

"I don't think you need worry very much about him," McClure returned dryly, emphasizing the final pronoun. "He has been in the same fix a dozen times

before. What are you going to do when Maybrick comes back? He'll take us back to Saloko, you know."

Miss Severoid's firm little jaws came together.

"He won't!" she said deliberately. "I'm going to Benin City and—and you're not going to leave me, are you?"

"Not if I can avoid it. But—you see—well—the lieutenant thinks those guns and things outside Mora's door came—from me. And that sort of complicates—"

"From you! B-but how can he think that?"

"Because we have lived in the Beni village of Basanna for several days just as safely as if we were in Segwanga, and that privilege, since Clavering gave these people bad habits, can be purchased only by—those things. Consequently, because the lieutenant knows nothing of your white-flanneled friend, he makes a very natural deduction and drags me in. And if he thought I'd been hobnobbing with Mr. C. I don't think he'd bother to give me any more of a trial than that gentleman will get when they catch him."

"You mean he'd—"

"Sh! Here comes Maybrick back again. What do you wish me to do? Look cheap or make one last play to the gallery?" He fingered the butt of his revolver as he spoke, just to see what she would do.

With a swift glance into his eyes—a look he remembered long afterward when it was the only thing that made him want to live—she leaped at his right hand and seized it in both of hers.

"Don't!"

McClure smiled and feasted his soul upon her frightened eyes.

"Give me the revolver," she whispered. "Please!"

He removed his hand from the butt. Instantly

snatching the weapon from its holster, Miss Severoid sprang away from him in a manner that made him gasp, and ran swiftly toward the door, just as Lieutenant Maybrick, set-faced and very serious, came in again.

She almost collided with him, and clutching his arm frantically, thrust McClure's revolver at him as though she could not get rid of it quickly enough.

"It's Mr. McClure's," she said anxiously. "I—I was afraid he was going to shoot you, so I took it from him!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE CONQUEST OF THE GOVERNMENT

Miss Severoid glanced affrightedly behind her, as if she were afraid McClure was in pursuit; and the trader did not know whether to laugh or swear.

Maybrick, quite subconsciously, put a protecting arm about her as she leaned, limp and breathless, against his shoulder, and the look he gave McClure was steely.

There was a short, sharp order to the Yorubas in the doorway, and two seconds later the trader was under arrest, with a Yoruba upon either side of him.

He did not speak, but inwardly he groaned. When ordered to march from the hut into the open he obeyed without demur, striding past the stern-visaged lieutenant and the woman who shrank into the protection of his good left arm. without so much as a glance at either of them.

But his soul was writhing in Gehenna for all that!

Lieutenant Maybrick led Miss Severoid slowly and very gently to a chair.

He felt that she was much more to be pitied than blamed for having succumbed to the "wiles of a hypocritical beast like McClure," and as he considered that she had probably saved his life, it was not difficult for him to believe that she was not nearly so bad as her situation painted her. In addition to which she was a deucedly pretty woman; and the lieutenant had an eye for feminine loveliness, as a fleeting glance at the lady he had married would have proven.

"Don't be afraid," he said in a low tone of assurance. "It's all right. We'll start back for Saloko very shortly, and I don't think he'll bother you again."

Miss Severoid retained her grip upon his sleeve and looked up at him with large, baby-blue eyes that said she was quite sure she had at last found some one she could trust.

"You are very good to me," she said simply. "And I'm not a bit afraid with you. I wish you could go on to Benin City with me. Do you think you could?"

Maybrick blinked and gaped a little, but Miss Severoid rattled on, always careful to keep the lieutenant's attention fixed upon her face—which he did not find a hardship:

"You see, I simply *have* to go, and when I persuaded Mr. McClure to go with me I thought everything would be all right. And it would have been, too, if that beast Cralla hadn't struck Mr. McClure across the eyes with one of those terrible whips and then run away and left us in a rain-storm.

"Mr. McClure could not see and we got lost. Then, after we'd walked and walked, and I began to limp and feel queer and chilly, Mr. McClure carried me—oh, I don't know how long!"

"But I thought you said he could not see?" the lieutenant interposed mildly, and his look was becoming just a little covetous.

"And he couldn't. He just had to stumble along and trust to the guidance of the Kroo-boy who was with us. Then I fainted or something, and when I woke up I was in that bed over there and Mr. Clavering was standing—"

"Clavering!" Lieutenant Maybrick's jaw dropped stupidly.

"Yes, Mr. Clavering—looking as if he'd stepped out of a tailor's shop window. I don't know where he

came from, but I'd met him once before, you know, when the Mission launch broke down and—"

"Yes—er—yes, I heard of that. And what did he do this time?"

"Took care of me like a brother. He was really awfully nice, and he must have given that old beast Mora all those guns and things to keep him quiet, because we haven't been bothered in the least while we've been here.

"Mr. McClure was in the hut next door, and he didn't dare trust himself in the sun till this afternoon, shortly before you came. And if he had known that Clavering was so near he would have shot him on sight. He's said so a hundred times. But fortunately he couldn't see to shoot anything, and when I told him this afternoon who was responsible for all the mercies we had received, he was terribly angry and shot holes in a coconut—just to try his aim. You can go out and look at the coconut, if you like."

A pause. Maybrick stroked his chin and did his best to look official. He was a capable and efficient officer who had heaped credit upon himself in the Sudan and India.

But Miss Severoid was—well—she wasn't a howling dervish nor yet a greasy Pathan.

"Umph! I suppose that was the shooting I heard. And when did Clavering leave?"

"This morning early," Miss Severoid lied readily. "He said he'd probably see me again in Mayona, but I hope he isn't going to annoy me. He gives me the creeps."

And instantly Maybrick gobbled at the bait—hook and altogether. Miss Severoid's innocent blue eyes looked up at him dreamily and waited a little while so that he could take a proper hold, then she continued as though the lieutenant's anxiety to stifle the eager

questions he wished to put to her was not written in every line of his face.

"Mr. McClure knew that you thought he had bribed Mora with all that powder and stuff, and got so terribly angry I thought he would surely shoot you. He's awfully sensitive about his honor; and you'd be angry, too, if any one accused you of a thing like that. I know you would, because you have such a strong face. It's so—so—oh, I can't describe faces very well, but I seem to sense purpose in a man!"

Maybrick colored a little and was confused. There are few men who are not susceptible to cleverly administered flattery, and Maybrick was not the exception.

But there was more genius in Miss Severoid's simply told tale than appeared on the surface.

At the very first mention of Clavering's name—before the higher authorities and red-tape had had an opportunity to make things unpleasant for McClure—the charge against the trader was dismissed ere it had been made.

Instantly Maybrick's mind swept in pursuit of Clavering—just as Miss Severoid intended that it should—and as he toyed with McClure's revolver he almost forgot the trader in the much larger prospect of capturing Clavering—by the judicious use of the beautiful Miss Severoid as an innocent "stool-pigeon."

He was blissfully unconscious of the fact that Miss Severoid had created those intentions for him so that he would not be so very anxious to go back to Saloko.

"You—er—you mentioned Chief Cralla, I think," he said, breaking a short pause. "You mean the chief of Akerri, I suppose. What was his particular service?"

"Oh, he was just showing us the way and his boys were the carriers! I haven't seen him since he deserted us in the rain-storm. But I imagine it was be-

cause Clavering was here that he stayed away so long."

She smiled knowingly, and Maybrick tried to look as if he understood, but his mind was groping in a gray-black darkness. Glancing lazily out of the window to where Basanna's female population was huddled affrightedly together, he tried to gain a little time to think.

Miss Severoid's face was calm and her innocence was sublime. Picking her handkerchief out of her lap she bit upon the corner of it like a child, pulling upon it as if to learn which was the stronger—her teeth or the linen.

Maybrick looked around again.

"How do you know that Cralla is afraid of Clavering?"

"Well, everybody knows that he betrayed Clavering at Saganna."

"Um—yes—I suppose he did! How did you get him to agree—"

Miss Severoid's smile interrupted him.

"If I told you that I'd tell you the whole story—which even Mr. McClure doesn't know. Please let me be mysterious a little while longer. I like the sensation immensely!"

Maybrick laughed in spite of himself, but immediately tried to be serious again.

"Then I suppose it is useless to ask you why you are going to Benin City?"

"I'm afraid so."

"You are sure that what you are going for—is there?"

"I hope so. And please don't look so solemn. You are much nicer when you smile."

Maybrick fidgeted and tried to oblige; but he thought she was too pretty a woman to look at any man

as she was looking at him then. She made him feel uncomfortably lacking in poise—mental and physical —and he found himself being very sorry for her, particularly when she rose and stood astonishingly near to him as she tried to see what was going on outside.

Somewhere in the back of Maybrick's mind there was a hazy thought for a company of Yorubas and the sandy-haired McClure, but as Miss Severoid suddenly swayed a little and glanced in soft appeal into his eyes, he forgot about the Yorubas altogether in a frantic effort to save her from falling.

With a frightened little gasp she accommodatingly fell his way, and somehow, a little while later, her head was pillowed on his shoulder and his arms were tenderly about her, holding her upon her feet.

"I—I—oh—please—" she began and did not trouble to go any further since Maybrick's arms tightened of their own accord.

"It—it's all right," he whispered assuringly, but there was a rather queer, furtive look in his eyes and he was breathing a little faster. "You are just a little faint. Just—that is—don't be afraid. I'll—"

He stopped there.

It was a long way from Basanna to London, where Maybrick's wife at that moment sat writing to—Lieutenant Jack Sylvester, on leave, asking him why he had not called the previous evening; a letter which concluded pitifully with—"Your very own, lonely Margery."

But perhaps Maybrick had telepathic communication with London.

In any case he did something then that surprised himself much more than it did Miss Severoid.

He bent his head very suddenly and kissed the tempting, upturned lips that were so very near his own.

They seemed to invite him to do so, and resistance to the impulse was scarcely thought of till Miss Severoid, struggling out of his embrace, thrust him from her in gasping anger at the manner in which her faith in him had been outraged.

It was capitally done. Maybrick felt and looked like a cad, and as Miss Severoid gave him to understand that he *was* one, he did not dream that he had been victimized, and placed in line with Clavering and McClure so that he might be obedient instead of obeyed.

Then, seeing that he felt his guilt keenly enough, and having listened to his stammering apologies, Miss Severoid reluctantly forgave him with a tantalizing something in her manner that mothered and pitied him and, at the same time, led him to hope that some day, if he were very good, he might actually be allowed to kiss her again.

Maybrick's expression was hopeful, yet sheepish. The world without came back to him with a jar, and he remembered very suddenly that he had a company of Yorubas waiting for orders—and a prisoner, of whom he was a little jealous.

Then, too, he remembered Clavering and laughed oddly.

"I don't suppose you have any objections to my going as far as Mayona with you?"

Miss Severoid was looking out of the window, trying to get a glimpse of McClure in captivity. But her vision was limited, and she saw only a few scared Beni women and the disconsolate Plymouth, who did not seem to know what to make of anything.

She faced Maybrick very deliberately.

"No. I have no objections. But the soldiers will make my peaceful little expedition seem like a declaration of war. And that would never do. Still, if you

are going only as far as Mayona, I don't suppose it would matter much."

Instead of being dictated to, Miss Severoid was dictating, and she appreciated the change hugely—while Maybrick, who had no intention of leaving all of his Yorubas at Basanna, tried to look as if he were giving her opinion serious thought.

"Well—that is—I think I'll take some of them as far as Mayona," he concluded, and his glance became apologetic again. "Just tell me again that you are not terribly angry."

"I will be if you don't get one of your soldiers to fetch some water so that I can make tea. And please go out and ask Mr. McClure to join us. He doesn't care much for tea, but I think you'd both like to make up over a Scotch-and-soda. Pity we haven't any ice, isn't it?"

And the teasing flash of humor in her eyes and the tempting wonder of her smile made Maybrick feel that the power of yea and nay had slipped out of his grasp.

Ere ten minutes had gone McClure was back in the hut, still wondering, and with his revolver back in its holster; Plymouth was serving drinks as if he were glad of the opportunity, and Miss Severoid, beaming in contentment over a cup of tea and some crackers and marmalade, was distributing her smiles equally between the soldier and the trader, making them each feel that the other was there only on sufferance.

McClure asked no questions. Miss Severoid's methods and magic were not new to him, and he accepted her conquests as a matter of course, even when he saw Maybrick despatch one of his Yorubas back to Saloko with a note, and learned that the lieutenant, and probably half of his men, were going with them, at least as far as Mayona.

Maybrick's message to the D. C. at Saloko ran:

BASANNA, 10th, 5.30 P. M.—Have found the runaways. They've been Mora's guests for four days. Miss S., who has been down with malaria, is a friend of Clavering's, so you can imagine who paid for Mora's hospitality.

McClure is quite tame and harmless. Been blind for several days—hippo-hide across the eyes, not liquor. The lady has him eating out of her hand, and she has a wild idea about going to Benin City for something mysterious—the bones of Prester John, probably. You have to see her to believe it all.

Think I can prevent her doing anything very foolish, and use her to help me catch Mr. C.

Am starting for Mayona with her party, which includes Chief Cralla, of Akerri—an unknown quantity meantime. There is a lot of contraband stuff in these parts, and I expect to have to confiscate most of it, so perhaps you'd better send Forrester and Dale with their companies in case there is a muss.

I think I'm going to have a hell of a time.

MAYBRICK.

And when Maybrick wrote that last sentence he went nearer to the truth than he imagined.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RETURN OF THE CHIEF

McClure did not believe that Clavering would like the Yoruba addition to the party; yet, when the frightened Basanna women were ordered to go out in search of the fleeing carriers, with instructions to assure them of their safety at the hands of the government, it was remarkable how quickly the Jackries reappeared and herded together in their accustomed places, quite as if nothing whatever had happened.

Ilora was the first to return. The others trooped after her in twos and threes like sheep, and she counted them and their packs as they came in. Then, when the roster was complete, she shuffled, with that inimitably indifferent gait of which she was so guilty, to her post as Miss Severoid's maid. She almost instantly attracted the attention of Lieutenant Maybrick, who, leisurely sipping his second Scotch-and-soda, chatted a little more easily with his hostess, and tried to reëstablish himself as an officer and a gentleman.

McClure had gone out to see that none of the provision packs had been tampered with. He was rather indolently contemplating the greasy mob of Benis that came scattering back from hiding to cower like whipped dogs from the idling Yorubas. They paid no attention to them, but munched silently upon their rations of ship's biscuits and salt beef.

Chief Mora was not among those who came back. No one expected him to while the soldiers were there.

But in any case he never did.

And to anticipate a little, his body was found the following day in the underbrush not more than two miles south of the village, and it was evident from the condition of the skull that death had been instantaneous; wherein Mora had received more mercy than he had often given.

No one knew who was responsible for it; but it was a generally accepted fact that Clavering rarely allowed a fallen chief the opportunity of throwing himself upon the mercy of the government.

And though McClure did not think of it at the time, he saw a small, dark red spot—like blood—upon the sleeve of Chief Cralla's white coat when, just as the shroud of night was swiftly enveloping the earth, the wily Jackrie gentleman came with labored majesty into Basanna from the north—the direction of the Mayona road.

His pace was much slower than usual, and he looked as though he had been drinking. Yet, though his feet were dusty, his apparel was quite as scrupulously exact as ever.

The presence of the Yorubas apparently surprised him, but McClure's palm-leaf eye-shade frightened him still more, and as the trader approached him, Cralla's arms rose shrinkingly in a pitiful attitude of defense.

It was then that McClure saw the little red spot—like blood.

The chief appeared to be very much disturbed about what every one round about thought of his situation, and it was noticeable that though the Yorubas deigned to observe and enjoy his undignified predicament, not a single Jackrie or Beni dared to be even interested in it.

But McClure did not menace the chief in any way, principally because the time and place were not pro-

pitious. Later, if they both lived, it would be different.

"Well, chief, what's the trouble? I think you live for Mayona?"

Cralla lowered his arms doubtfully.

"Be so, Mas' MaClu', I come from dere. I say to myse'f, if Mas' MaClu' flog me, what I can do? If he make shoot palaver foh me!" Cralla shrugged his shoulders hopelessly and resignedly. "Be all same which place I die—so I come look you to see what palaver you make foh me. Then I fit to sleep."

In other words, Cralla wished McClure to understand that he had become so nervous about his fate at the trader's hands that he could not sleep, and had come from Mayona determined to settle the matter one way or another.

"You' eye hurt plenty too much?" he queried anxiously.

McClure made no answer. He did not think much of Cralla's repentance, and did not believe that he had come from Mayona to apologize and take his medicine.

But that did not bother the chief very much. A Jackrie does not care particularly whether he is believed or not so long as the excuse he offers serves the purpose of saving his skin.

"Mayona no good?" McClure asked pointedly as he led the way toward Miss Severoid's hut.

"Mayona fine!" Cralla protested at once. "I come from dere."

McClure grunted, and without another word entered Miss Severoid's hut, where two small kerosene lamps flickered and cast black shadows.

Cralla followed.

Maybrick wheeled in his chair so sharply that it almost collapsed, and Miss Severoid, starting up in surprise, smothered an exclamation and sat slowly

down again, folding her hands with nervous tightness in her lap.

Ilora, busying herself with the preparation of a canned-food dinner, showed the whites of her eyes for a second, then slipped into the shadows as if afraid she might be too conspicuous.

"Cralla's come to make his peace with me," McClure announced. "Says he can't sleep until he does. The charge against him is that of whacking me over the eyes with a hippo-hide. And he pleads guilty. What'll we do to him, Maybrick?"

"Is that official or just personal?" the lieutenant asked, looking Cralla over very carefully.

"Oh, just personal!"

"Then I would suggest, under the circumstances, that you nurse your wrath to keep it warm. Later you might hang him up by the toes and keep him spinning round while you larruped the soles of his feet; or, better still, tie his head between his knees and suspend him over a slow fire. Neither would be adequate, but they'd help. What does Miss Severoid think?"

Miss Severoid scarcely heard. She was not listening to Maybrick. All her attention was centered upon Cralla, who plainly avoided meeting her puzzled scrutiny, and gave all his attention to Maybrick and McClure, fawning upon them and trying to look as though he enjoyed being there.

Miss Severoid met Maybrick's inquiry with an apologetic smile.

"I'm afraid I wasn't listening. What did you say?"

"It's too bloodthirsty to repeat, but we've decided that Cralla is to have another chance for the present." Then to Cralla: "Palaver set, chief. *Squattez vous.* Have a drink?"

Cralla grinned and sat down upon a mat, folding his legs under him like the blades of a pocket-knife; and McClure, calling Plymouth, ordered him to serve more drinks.

Outside the night was black as ink. The low, murmuring whine of Mora's children, huddling affrightedly together in their squalor, mingled with the drone of the Yorubas who were gathered about the small fire they had built for cooking purposes.

The atmosphere in the hut was suffocatingly humid. Glancing into Maybrick's face inquiringly, to gain a hint of his intentions, Miss Severoid was a little afraid that his Scotch-and-soda had been too much Scotch. There was an uneasy recklessness in his eyes that was disturbing, particularly in view of the story she had told him.

Seated upon an upturned packing-case, McClure said nothing. He just stroked his mustache, drank slowly, and watched.

Cralla took his whisky neat and at a gulp.

"Be good," he declared, reluctantly lowering his glass. "Jackrie man like um too much."

Maybrick grinned in approval.

"And you be big man in Jackrie country, no be so?"

"Eh—heh!" Cralla agreed emphatically. "I be chief of Akerri. You savvy Akerri?"

"I savvy. All men savvy Akerri. Chief Cralla live dere." Cralla and the lieutenant grinned with one accord. "And I savvy Chief Cralla be proper man. He be proper friend foh the gov'ment, too, no be so?"

"Be so! I be frien' foh gov'ment all the time. I be frien' of Nige' Comp'ny and I be frien' of Englan' man. I savvy gov'ment palaver too much. When black man make palaver foh gov'ment black man die,

dat's all. I no wanta die. When I die! *Ee-yaw! Yella! Yella! Yella!"*

Cralla took his head in his hands and shook it dolefully, moaning and making noises with his tongue like a clucking hen. Miss Severoid, watching him very intently, clasped her hands the tighter in her lap for fear she would applaud. She knew good acting when she saw it.

"Good!" Maybrick approved. "Gov'ment savvy Chief Cralla be fine man. Have another drink. Boy, bring Chief Cralla another drink. It's not my whisky, so it doesn't matter."

He laughed toward McClure, who smiled and nodded to Plymouth.

Cralla accepted the invitation readily enough, disposed of the second drink as he had done the first, then looked to Maybrick for the reason for it all.

He learned it quickly enough.

"If I take Yoruba man to Mayona palaver live?"

Cralla shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"I no savvy. Chief Tomi of Mayona be my frien'. Some time my frien' be fool, and I t'ink he be wise man. If Chief Tomi be fool, be my palaver? Whatta matter you take Yoruba man to Mayona?"

Maybrick explained that he had no particular object in view in taking the Yorubas to Mayona; that he merely wished to give Miss Severoid a safe escort, and that he was anxious to learn before allowing her to go any farther what was likely to be the temper of the country in the north, particularly after the fall of Mora.

Which was a plausible explanation enough, but which had no bearing on Maybrick's real intentions.

Cralla pondered the matter for a little while, and then delivered himself of the opinion that, though he

did not believe there would be any hostility, the sight of the Yorubas would be sure to indicate warlike intentions upon the part of the government. Chief Tomi was a belligerent individual who had to be handled with gloves.

Maybrick knew that, and it is not an officer's duty to make trouble, but to avoid it. This was why he was feeling out the ground carefully, with an unhappy suspicion that Cralla was not the friend of the government he professed to be.

But Clavering was in the north—had said he would meet Miss Severoid again at Mayona—and that was a promise too tempting to resist. Dale and Forrester with their companies could not possibly be up earlier than a day and a half, and, as Maybrick expressed it to himself, "a deuce of a lot can happen in that time."

He might actually be safer and possibly surer of success if he did leave the Yorubas behind at Bassana, where they could wait for the Dale and Forrester contingent and come forward to Mayona in a short night march whenever he, Maybrick, said he was ready for them.

It was a dangerous expedient, and there was nothing very definite about its possibilities; but it had the virtue of being less demonstrative and less suspicious than any other of which the Lieutenant could think just then. He was also reasonably convinced of the fact that the man who caught Clavering in a net would have to go about the business very quietly indeed.

"All right, Cralla. I savvy you be frien' foh gov'-ment, so we'll leave the Yoruba man at Basanna. I'll come and say *chin-chin* to Chief Tomi myself. Be all right?"

Cralla nodded sagely, and McClure and Miss Severoid exchanged disapproving glances as the chief ac-

cepted his third drink. Almost immediately he became loquacious and somewhat confused, even to mingling Jackrie with his pidgin English.

The sum of his remarks was—nothing, though Maybrick waited patiently and plied him hopefully with a fourth drink. This only succeeded in making Cralla descend to the Sobo and Ejau jargons.

Maybrick and McClure both knew a little Jackrie, and the trader knew enough Sobo to do business with it; but the Ejau tongue was a closed book to him. When Cralla's head began to roll and a stream of harsh Ejau gutturals poured forth it was doubtful whether he was blessing or cursing them.

It sounded like a malediction. Ejau always does.

But Ilora, preparing an improvised table of deal boards slung across two packing-cases, knew what he meant and, even as she worked, caught every word of it.

"Send runner to Chief Tomi and tell him government man comes to say *chin-chin.* He comes alone. Mora was a fool and is dead. Tomi, take warning. If Tomi is quiet, Tomi will live a long time. If he is a fool, like government man, both will die quickly. When the white mammy's purpose has been served then may Tomi fight and hurl the white man into the pit."

Cralla's chin fell slowly on to his breast, and his voice trailed away into frothy, unintelligible mutterings that finally ceased altogether.

And as Ilora, whose comings and goings from the hut had been frequent and necessary, slipped out into the night and sent the message word for word as she had received it, Maybrick, with a halting apology to Miss Severoid, went to the door of the hut and, calling his two orderlies, ordered them to "take this drunken beast out."

Which they did, and by no means gently, dumping the limp and apparently whisky-numbed chief into the midst of his carriers like a sack of yams.

But Cralla had one eye open, and he had a good memory for faces.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PLOT

Maybrick took his two orderlies with him to Mayona. They were the Yorubas who had treated Cralla like a sack of yams, and Cralla knew it.

But neither Cralla nor McClure knew anything about the two companies of Yorubas that were coming on from Saloko to join Maybrick's company at Basanna and make a night march to Mayona when necessary, it being Maybrick's intention to delay Miss Severoid's expedition at Mayona upon one pretext and another until he had discovered Clavering's whereabouts and was in a position to act with decision in the matter.

And, whether Clavering were caught or not, Miss Severoid's expedition was not to go any farther than Mayona. Benin City had no place in Maybrick's plans.

Of the march to Mayona there is little to record. The start was delayed by a two-hour thunder-plump, and when they finally got under way everybody was sweltering and swearing except Miss Severoid, who had not been long enough in the country.

Then, when they had gone several miles and were sticky and miserable and gasping for something to drink, one of the carriers inconsiderately contracted blackwater fever, and his brethren threatened to desert like scared rats.

But Cralla held them in check and made them dig

a shallow, marshy hole with their machetes. The grave was ready half an hour before the victim died.

In spite of the curse of prickly heat that made him want to revert to the costume of Adam, Maybrick did his best to assure Miss Severoid that the few hours' delay meant nothing at all. But McClure, still wearing his eye-shade, stood heavily by and said very little. Usually when blackwater came among a body of natives it was epidemic, because it was engendered by the indiscriminate drinking of swamp-water. The time was near when the trader had been in the habit of watching his breakwater in the mornings to learn who was missing; when the bush paths became a graveyard for those who lay where they fell, and when the wailing dirge of the women who mourned came across the water almost every hour for days—weeks sometimes—till the Grim Reaper seemed to grow tired of the sound and took his scythe elsewhere.

However, Mayona was reached early in the afternoon without further casualties, though the knees of most of the carriers were bent shakingly forward. When Cralla had herded them into Chief Tomi's compound at the end of a coiling hippo-thong they collapsed, whining and shivering away from each other, every man watching his neighbor for the dread sign of the death that had come among them.

The hammock bearers, led by Ilora, carried Miss Severoid around to a hut immediately behind Chief Tomi's mud palace. As McClure and Plymouth followed, Maybrick and Cralla halted to bestow a searching glance upon the fear-stricken carriers and to hold a peace palaver with the lynx-eyed Tomi, who waddled out to bid them an oily welcome in the gala attire of a two-piece print-cloth and a cheaper gray shirt.

Not that Tomi could not afford better clothing, but, like *Uriah Heep,* he preferred to be "'umble." He

had acquired much surplus fat in an otiose life that had led him, with scarcely any trouble at all, through rivers of other men's blood. And he had enjoyed himself immensely. He bubbled over with good humor, and the more he bubbled the more devilish he became.

As he greeted Maybrick with an unctuous grin and offered his hand white-man fashion, to show that he was a friend of the government, he was apparently very happy to meet the lieutenant and his two Yorubas.

But, then, Yorubas are such splendid sport—when there are but two of them and those two are unarmed. One can use them as targets when one wants to practise with the white man's weapons, shooting low, of course, so as not fatally to injure the little brown men. They can afterward be crucified for the delectation of the masses, it being definitely understood that the Beni masses will be sure to like anything a Yoruba doesn't.

And yet, in spite of Tomi's natural inclinations, the evidence of Clavering's uncanny influence was again apparent. There was but little curiosity upon the part of Mayona's greasy population, and no sign of hostility.

Stuffy and filthy and noxious, and quiet as a Sunday afternoon at home, Mayona was just a slightly larger repetition of Basanna. After Maybrick had delivered a message which had supposedly come direct from the Great White Queen to Chief Tomi of Mayona, the lieutenant sauntered toward Miss Severoid's quarters, conscious of the fact that if he cared to search Chief Tomi's dwelling he could unearth sufficient proof of the chief's affiliation with Clavering to warrant an execution without the bother of a trial.

But Maybrick did not care whether he caught Tomi napping or not. He was hunting bigger game.

Cralla and Tomi watched his idling gait till he dis-

appeared behind the latter chief's hut with the Yorubas trailing him as a matter of course.

Then Tomi whispered in Beni:

"Is he a fool that he comes to mock me with but two of the accursed?"

"Two throats are quicker cut than a hundred," Cralla returned dryly in the same jargon. "But not now. When the white mammy's purpose has been served—that was my message. Is Tomi a fool or a friend?"

Tomi's good humor vanished at once, and he became very unhappy because it was decreed that two perfectly good Yorubas were to slip through his fingers. Therefore, he sniveled and, figuratively at least, groveled at Cralla's feet as the chief of Akerri led the way toward the hut of his host.

In Miss Severoid's quarters, which were again marked by Clavering's consideration for the more gentle needs of a lady, Maybrick found McClure assuring her that he did not think that the blackwater among the carriers would become epidemic.

"I don't think it will, either," the lieutenant chimed in, supporting the lie amiably enough. "But I think we'd better wait a day or two so that we can be sure of it before we go any farther. You'd be in a deuce of a fix if a few of them went under between this place and Tulami, because the rest would bolt and Cralla would not be able to bring them back this time. They'd say your expedition was a *juju*. Let's wait a couple of days anyway, and see what happens."

In which advice there was much subtle wisdom. It was not only practical and considerate, but it principally served Maybrick's purpose to encourage delay.

McClure nodded thoughtfully, partly because he believed there was some merit in the lieutenant's proposal, and greatly because he had not given up hope that

Miss Severoid would come to her senses in time. But Miss Severoid, to whom delays were as knife-thrusts, did not appreciate the threat of another. As at all times when things showed a tendency to go wrong, she instantly wished she could talk to Clavering and ask his advice.

Furthermore, she wished to warn him that Maybrick knew of the possibility of his being in Mayona.

Consequently, immediately after the usual canned-food dinner, at which McClure tried to take a large view of life while Maybrick was forcing himself to be amusing, she became very sleepy and told the gentlemen that she thought she would retire. The moment she was alone she scribbled upon a scrap of white wrapping paper:

I'd like to talk to you, if I could, but I told Lieutenant Maybrick about your being so good to me at Basanna. That's why he didn't take us all back to Saloko. So please be very careful. He says we can't go on for a few days because some of the carriers may die. Please help me to get away from him. He's doing his best not to make love to me, but that won't last, and I can't be mean to him without offending the government.

Which was not altogether fair to Maybrick, who had striven to be entertaining at dinner so that she might not guess that two more carriers were hastening toward a scooped-out grave as fast as blackwater fever would carry them.

A few of the others had fled, showing their teeth and the whites of their eyes in the grip of a terror which nothing could subdue; and they would keep on and on till they dropped from sheer exhaustion, or until the death they were fleeing from overtook them and pulled them down, writhing, in their tracks.

As Miss Severoid folded the note and gave it to Ilora, with cautious instructions to deliver it to Cralla and thence to Clavering, both Maybrick and McClure

were groping their way toward Tomi's compound in search of later information regarding the carriers.

One of the Yorubas preceded them with a hurricane lantern; the other, with a purpose in view, assisted Plymouth in standing guard before the door of Miss Severoid's hut.

But Ilora paid no heed to them as, sullen and obedient, she slipped out to deliver the note to Clavering by way of Cralla. When she returned, barely half an hour later, bearing a neatly folded reply, Miss Severoid, who had been listening in chilly solitude and desolation to the eery moanings of the carriers, sprang up to meet the Jackrie girl with a demonstration of welcome that was not far from hysteria.

Her nerves were approaching that ragged stage when little things become colossal and big things are too large to be understood; and the speed with which Ilora had returned was an incomprehensible mystery.

She made no effort to account for Clavering's nearness. Carrying his answer hastily to the feeble light of her lamp, she discovered that there were two messages, both of which she devoured greedily.

The first read:

DEAR MISS SEVEROID:

Let Ilora bring you to a place she knows as soon as you are able to get away from the others. Don't be afraid, and don't hesitate, because I can't wait very long. It is imperative that you see me, else I would not bother you.

CLAVERING.

And the other:

Show Maybrick the other note and say to him that you were afraid to meet me and yet afraid to refuse. He'll be sure to help you. No harm will come to him. G. C.

They were not very quieting replies, inasmuch as they suggested treachery so deliberately that Miss Sev-

eroid shrank from the part she was asked to play. But Benin City and the realization of her hopes were so near that the sensation of squeamishness was soon lost in her feverish desire to go on, driving through every obstacle to her goal.

And she had already climbed several erstwhile impassable barriers in traveling from London to Mayona.

As she absently tore Clavering's second note into very small pieces, the expression upon her face declared that her thoughts were not upon the writer, but that they had drifted out into the opaque darkness, and were centered upon something that made her eyes more luminous than ever and her lips a soft, quivering temptation that even a misanthrope could not have resisted.

Then, suddenly awakening from these idle dreams, she hastily scribbled another note—to Maybrick this time.

LIEUTENANT MAYBRICK:
Please come and see me at once. I have something very important to tell you. But don't bring Mr. McClure.

MISS S.

When Ilora, sneering evilly under cover of the darkness, slipped that very small scrap of paper into Maybrick's hand, he started and spun round on his heel like a top. But the girl, per instructions, had been careful to wait until McClure had directed his attention to a groaning carrier who was suffering under the possession of an active imagination.

"Sof'ly," she whispered cautiously, and slipped noiselessly away again. The lieutenant, suppressing an exclamation and an impulse to ask questions, speedily adjusted his mind to the situation, and at once found an opportunity to read Miss Severoid's message. It surprised and puzzled him still more.

Then, as he glanced guiltily in McClure's direction, the rotund figure of Chief Tomi came out of the murk and halted at McClure's side. The chief remained jabbering to McClure in a mixture of Beni and pidgin-English, evidently intent upon helping him to keep the panic from spreading beyond the ranks of the carriers. There was no sign of Cralla.

Had Maybrick known that Tomi was occupying McClure's attention for a purpose and a price, the lieutenant would undoubtedly have hesitated a little longer than he did. As it was, he hesitated barely a minute, and in a very few more he was standing before Miss Severoid in her ill-lit, shadow-filled hut, expectantly waiting for her to speak.

Ilora had remained outside and was regarding Maybrick's Yorubas with sullen resentment because they ignored her and talked in a language she did not understand. Squatting upon a mat upon the other side of the door and puffing laboriously upon a cheap and squeaky pipe filled with cheaper hogshead tobacco, Plymouth ogled up at her through the smoke, only to be served by the girl as she was served by the Yorubas.

"He wants me to meet him," Miss Severoid began timidly, looking innocently up into Maybrick's troubled face; "and I'm afraid to. But I thought perhaps you'd—"

"You mean—"

"Sh!"

They both looked about them furtively, and then Maybrick's glance met Miss Severoid's in perfect understanding. At least he thought so, and he felt a little ashamed of himself for having left one of his Yorubas at her door to spy upon her.

"McClure's so hasty," she whispered hurriedly. "He'd be sure to shoot, and there mustn't be any of that unless it's desperately necessary. I don't know

what he can possibly want to see me for, but—but it may be something important, and he was so good to me at Basanna that I'd feel mean if I refused to go. Of course, I know I shouldn't meet him. That's compounding a felony or something, isn't it? And that's why I'm telling you about it first to see if you'd allow it. Couldn't you follow me at a safe distance and—and just sort of take care of me without—oh, well—I don't want him arrested yet, because he may be—useful."

Maybrick's lips twitched and broke in a friendly smile. Just then he admired Miss Severoid more than he ever had, partly because of the temptingly racy little twinkle in her eyes, but greatly because she had sense enough and courage enough to appreciate that a man like Clavering could be very useful upon such a venture as that upon which she was bent. He also experienced a pleasant thrill in the thought that she had confided in him in preference to McClure.

But he had not the least intention of allowing Clavering to be at liberty one minute longer than was necessary, feeling sure that, whether Miss Severoid thought so or not, he would be doing her a great kindness by putting an end to the Benin City tomfoolery as quickly as possible.

He did not tell her so, however.

"When have you to meet him?" he asked in a low monotone.

"Now—at once."

"Where?"

"I don't know. My girl does. That is what makes it so suspicious."

Miss Severoid always tried to mingle the truth and prevarication, so that the lie would agree with what the other person was likely to think of the truth.

Maybrick's lips drew a little tighter. He was try-

ing to be official and to study Miss Severoid's eyes and lips at the same time, with most uncertain results.

"I see," he said quietly, and then tried to calm her fears. "But that isn't anything very suspicious. He has friends among the natives everywhere. That girl of yours is simply doing as she's told. She may never have seen him before and may never see him again. Cralla would do the same thing. Any of them would, and we know it. It's a pity, though, that you sent her to me with that note. She may—"

He put his fingers to his lips, tiptoed to the door of the hut, and, looking out, was apparently satisfied to find that Ilora was still there.

Miss Severoid had to restrain an impulse to laugh outright, and, as he came softly back again, she actually felt sorry for him; so much so that the sensation of squeamishness came back to her.

"She's outside," Maybrick whispered. "If she goes away from there, or has already been away even for a minute, my orderlies will tell me. How did his message come?"

Miss Severoid produced a crumpled note from her blouse and, looking cautiously about her, slipped it into Maybrick's hand.

"Ilora brought it," she confessed. "And I've been afraid of her ever since."

Maybrick accepted the note without a word, carried it to the lamp and read and reread it, feeling quite sure that Miss Severoid must think a great deal of him to confide in him so much.

Then slowly tearing it up, he moved to her side again and looked down upon her with the eye of a man who is seeking after truth.

His official attitude had entirely given way to the other one.

"You can trust me to take care of you?" he asked

softly, by way of experiment. "Better than McClure?"

And he found that her eyes would not meet his. Her lashes swept her cheeks and her head was bowed a little. Vague murmurings and moanings came from without, but Maybrick scarcely heard them.

"You know I do," he heard her whisper. He did not know that, in spite of the seriousness of everything, she was praying to Heaven to save her from laughter.

There was a short, uncomfortable pause.

Maybrick did not know what to do or say. He moistened his lips, squared his shoulders, fidgeted with the butt of his revolver, and laughed—a forced, nervous sound that was rather stupid.

"Good little woman," he mumbled, and his fingers touched her arms. She could feel them tremble and tighten; the uncertain fingers of one who was about to make a grievous mistake. "Good little wo—"

"Don't!"

The word was low and imperative, and as Miss Severoid's head came up slowly, Maybrick caught the look in her eyes and understood perfectly. He tried to smile and the effect was ghastly.

"Oh—er—well—of course—" He backed away a step or two, very ill at ease. "You—that is—I'll follow you—bring my orderlies—nothing to be afraid of. I—er—that is—oh, damn! Don't look at me like that!"

But Miss Severoid only laughed, and the look that had bared Maybrick's guilty soul laughed, too, in an enigmatical sort of way that made him feel decidedly more foolish.

"That's better," she told him in a very soft voice. "I like to hear a man swear—sometimes. Now, please go. We haven't any more time to lose."

And Maybrick, mumbling an incoherent apology,

went sheepishly, feeling somewhat dazed and mystified, and having a sensation that he was lucky to be let down so lightly.

A few minutes later Miss Severoid, a little white about the corners of the mouth, blew out her lamp, and climbing through the low window-hole facing the rear—so that Plymouth might not have a tale to carry to his master—she tiptoed after Ilora, past darkened huts and the sleeping forms of natives lying outside their doors into a bush-path that led, so far as Miss Severoid knew, into an impenetrable blackness, and nothing more.

Maybrick and his orderlies followed at a careful distance.

CHAPTER XXV

METHOD IN HIS MADNESS

In a square-built, single-roomed hut that stood alone in the center of a small clearing about a mile and a half from the village, Clavering sat in solitary state in the comfortable depths of a collapsible deck-chair and blew thin streams of cigarette smoke toward the ceiling.

The hut was of medium size, and was just then undecidedly illuminated by a large stand-lamp which had been turned low and which stood very near to one of the windows, throwing the greater part of the place in deep shadows. There were native mats on the floor and others that made shades for the windows, of which there were two. The door was also similarly screened, making the hut unbearably stuffy.

A small wicker table at Clavering's elbow and a light Madeira chair completed the furnishings, since the black, tarpaulin-covered carrier's pack that lay in obscurity in the most shadowy corner of the room could not be considered as furniture.

Clavering's attitude was one of dreamy idleness. He appeared to be watching a dun-colored lizard on the wall opposite as though there were nothing more important to occupy his attention. To the buzz and the whistle of numberless and nameless insects he paid no heed, and the mosquitoes and sandflies bothered him not at all.

He stirred only when an intruding mangrove-fly threat-

ened him, and having successfully swatted the pest, he sat down again, a little annoyed at having been disturbed.

He was clothed, as Miss Severoid had first seen him, in a light-blue shirt, riding-breeches, and puttees, and his heavy walking boots hinted at the fact that he had done some recent and considerable tramping.

He carried no revolver. His shirt sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, displaying his sinewy brown forearms, and though his face was even paler and leaner than usual, there was a softer set to his thin-lipped mouth as from the smothering gloom without there came to his alert and sensitive ears the whispering rustle of skirts.

Three faint streaks of light in the midst of nothingness was Miss Severoid's impression of the hut as she emerged from the bush path in Ilora's wake and entered the clearing. There might have been a thousand men in the bush around for all that she could see or hear.

Maybrick and his two Yorubas did not follow her into the clearing at once. They halted several yards from the end of the bush path, and huddling closely together, watched Miss Severoid and Ilora disappear within the hut. Then, as the door-screen fell into place behind them, Maybrick crouched, went on a few steps, and as the outlines of the hut became clearer, descended to his hands and knees.

The Yorubas followed suit. One of them crept away toward the streak of light on the right, the other to the left; each making for a window, and each, in lieu of any other weapon, gripping the broad-bladed wrist-knife of the upper Niger.

Maybrick's objective was the door. There was no other outlet, and the lieutenant, judging that there was no window on the farther side of the hut, had a hasty

vision of taking Clavering captive and of leading him and Miss Severoid and the black girl back to Basanna without bothering to wait for daylight.

"McClure can wake up when he likes and fend for himself," was his mental comment. "Hope Miss S. doesn't make a scene. Hate like the dickens to go back on her like this, but—oh, rats! she isn't what you thought she was, so what's the use?"

And the lieutenant, feeling that these facts justified anything, lay flat upon his stomach and crawled inch by inch nearer to the door.

The moment Miss Severoid had entered, Clavering had risen and, grinding his cigarette under his heel, gave her a silent, smiling welcome and bowed her toward the Madeira chair. Ilora, going immediately into the shadows beside the tarpaulin-covered pack, huddled down on the mats like a sleek-coated puma. She rested her cheek in the hollow of her arm and did her best to give the impression that she had no interest whatever in what was to follow.

"Don't be afraid," Clavering said quietly, glancing into Miss Severoid's rather white face as he settled himself easily in his chair. "And don't be alarmed at anything that may happen. Has he really been disagreeable?"

Miss Severoid tried to feel comfortable and to look as if the place did not surprise her.

"N-no—that is—he's just a nuisance," she whispered, essaying a smile and leaning forward a little. "Shall we have to wait till the carriers are—"

"Not at all. We'll take the presumably sound and fill up the gaps with Benis. There is only one more stop—Tulami—and you'll reach there to-morrow at sunset. You'll start for Benin City the same night, an hour before midnight, and arrive about two in the morning, so that you'll be back in Tulami again about

sunrise. You'll use the hammock, of course, and I've no doubt that McClure can stand the slightly forced marching."

The shadow of a smile came and went.

"The lieutenant is going back to Basanna to rejoin his company. Nothing desperately bloodthirsty about that, is there?"

Miss Severoid looked doubtful. She was really afraid to speak, not knowing how near Maybrick and his Yorubas might be, and having no knowledge of the nature of the trap into which she had led them, her heart was beating at a suffocating rate and her ears were straining to catch every sound.

But she heard nothing save the monotonous shrill whistle of insects and the burring croak of frogs—sounds so incessant as to pass notice and become merged into the silence.

Clavering watched her with a quiet, unobtrusive interest that gave no hint of the passionate desire he had to carry her off to the ends of the earth, so that there would be just he and she alone, forever and ever. Whether young Debenham's existence disturbed him or not, he was subconsciously descending to what he had once ridiculed as "bookish sentimentality."

Therefore, being the manner of man he was, the ultimate result promised to be much more startling than Miss Severoid had bargained for. Just then, however, he was calm; and he was listening, too. So was Ilora, though she appeared to be half asleep.

"You feel much better, don't you?"

Miss Severoid started slightly. Clavering had made no effort to modulate his voice, and it sounded like a miniature thunderclap in the choking stillness.

"Yes—thanks—much better. I'll be all right—when—wh—"

It ended in a muffled little scream, and she started to

her feet impulsively to throw herself between Clavering and the door as the screen was suddenly whipped aside.

"Up with your hands, Clavering! Quick!"

Maybrick's sharp, grating voice was not in the least like his own. Tight-lipped, and with his nerves strung to breaking point as a result of the chance he had taken—a chance that proved he was no coward—he stood leveling his revolver at the bulk of Clavering's body, wondering why he was so slow upon the "draw."

But Clavering's hands shot into the air. There was not a second's hesitation, and he actually appeared to be terror-stricken.

Feeling very dizzy and uncertain of everything, Miss Severoid looked stupidly from the outlaw to the lieutenant and back again, asking herself what on earth had gone wrong with Clavering's plot.

"Stand aside, Miss Severoid, please!" Maybrick rasped nervously. "Sorry—can't help it. Where's that black girl? Ah—there you are, eh? Get up and go over beside your mistress. Get a move on! Don't be so damned slow! That's better. Orderly!"

The right window screen was swept aside and the left was similarly treated a second later. Two khaki-clad little men bounded into the room with their knives glinting savagely in their hands. It was a fearsome, blood-chilling spectacle, and Miss Severoid shut her eyes upon the thing she thought was going to happen; shut her eyes and tried to scream and could not.

Then she looked again, and saw that the Yorubas had halted about half a foot upon each side of Clavering, acknowledging the admission of his surrender indicated by his upraised arms.

Maybrick came a few steps nearer and Clavering shrank from his approach. Miss Severoid had never seen the outlaw look like that before; would not have believed that he could.

Then Maybrick saw that his captive's holster was empty; and some of the blood came back into his face.

"Huh! That's it, is it? Thought there was something wrong. I seem to have come along at the right time. Don't interfere, Miss Severoid, and don't think I'm a rotter. I have to do this. Got that piece of rope, orderly?"

On the point of pleading with Maybrick to remember his promise, Miss Severoid gulped down what she might have said, and backing away until her chair stopped her, she stood very still, watching the Yorubas bind Clavering's wrists with a piece of stout rope which one of them produced from his tunic.

Ilora stood near the window on the right beside the lamp, with an air of nonchalant indifference. When Maybrick ordered her sharply to "stand away from there!" she obeyed without any hesitation whatever, as if obedience to government officials was the most natural thing in the world to her.

Maybrick looked about him carefully.

"No one else—eh? All right. Any rope left, orderly?"

"Li'l piece, sah," one of the Yorubas answered dispassionately.

"Good. Tie the girl, too. I don't like her looks."

So they bound Ilora's wrists and arraigned her alongside her master, while Miss Severoid, choking and ready to shed copious tears of mortification and hopelessness, sank into her chair, biting her ashen lips to keep from crying out.

Then Maybrick was standing at her side, still keeping a cautious eye upon Clavering, who, up to that point in the proceedings, had not uttered a sound or made any resistance. In fact, he seemed to be afraid to move; and if the fear of death had never been writ-

ten upon a human face before, it was most certainly written in letters large and bold upon his then.

"I'm sorry," Maybrick apologized to Miss Severoid, moistening his lips. "But orders are orders, and I'm afraid we'll have to start back to Saloko without McClure. You see, I can't very well go through Mayona with his nibs, and I can't trust the black beauty as a messenger. It's beastly awkward, I know—but—oh, hang it, don't look like that! The bones of Prester John or whatever it is you are going for, will keep—and—well—that is—you can't go, that's all."

Miss Severoid got out of her chair an inch at a time, fixing Maybrick with the hopeless, impotent stare of one who is trying to meet a situation too large to be comprehended. In fact, her mind was shrouded in a stifling blackness, and was groping for just one little, gray beam of understanding.

"Can't go!" she whispered. "Can't—"

She stopped, and her glance shifted in a leaden sort of way in Clavering's direction. He was facing the door, and with Ilora slouching in captivity beside him, he appeared to have resigned himself to his fate. The Yorubas stood at attention waiting for orders.

And then it came home to Miss Severoid that everything had somehow or other gone wrong; that she was to be taken back to Saloko, and that all that she had planned and prayed and striven for with heart and body and soul was being snatched out of her grasp within sight of her goal by a smooth-shaven, weak-mouthed man who spoke foolishly of the "bones of Prester John" and held Clavering captive by reason of a piece of forged steel and some lead.

So, without a thought for the consequences, and uttering a queer little cry of anger and pain and desperation, she threw herself madly at Maybrick, clutching for his right hand; and when she missed her mark

by a respectable foot because the lieutenant with an involuntary oath swerved sharply and swept his arm upward out of reach she floundered heavily to her knees with a suddenness that made strange lights dance before her eyes and emphatically proved the theory that the world went round.

She had a vague understanding that Maybrick was sputteringly reprimanding her and that the Yorubas were to "take hold of them"—meaning Clavering and Ilora—and then she felt the touch of the lieutenant's hand upon her shoulder.

And at that moment, because Maybrick was not looking in that direction, a long, black, snakelike arm curved in through the window hole on the right—where the lamp was.

Followed the almost inaudible click of the lamp-shutter and a sudden and terrible darkness. The lamp had not been turned low for nothing.

"Damn—"

The oath, harsh and unconfined, was Maybrick's.

He straightened sharply, swung about, and faced his Maker in that second with the prayer of Ajax upon his lips.

Miss Severoid did not move. She could not. Her limbs were temporarily paralyzed, and there was an eternity in every second of time as she waited, still on her knees, for—Heaven alone knew what!

Maybrick was afraid to shoot in Clavering's direction for fear of hitting one of his orderlies, and he was equally afraid to rush toward his prisoners lest he might stumble over Miss Severoid, who knelt almost at his feet.

And it all happened in a few seconds—a ghostly, soundless business, in which the Yoruba ejaculations of surprise were suddenly and mysteriously silenced with scarcely a hint of a struggle, and which ended, so

far as Maybrick was concerned, when a naked arm slid about his throat and something clammy, like a cold and soapy sponge, was simultaneously clapped over his mouth and nostrils.

He gasped, just once—a deep inhalation of surprise—and his senses drifted out upon the pungent odor of decayed Yaka roots.

A grunting Jackrie guttural signified the successful conclusion of that strange attack, and as Maybrick slipped out of his assailant's grasp like an ill-filled sack, Miss Severoid felt his limp fingers brush her elbow as he sprawled on his face at her side.

The touch made her shiver and give vent to a low moan of fear and horror—the first sound she had uttered since the light went out.

Hardly knowing what she did, she rose shudderingly to her feet and groped dizzily in the direction in which she thought the door ought to be. Then, as her trembling knees threatened to give way, a hand came out of the opaque darkness and, gently gripping her arm, led her swiftly out past indistinct shadows of things that breathed like human beings—which was all she ever saw or heard of Clavering's rescuers.

Something like a sob escaped her as a breath of cooler air fanned her cheek.

"Sh!" Clavering soothed, leading her without pause across the clearing, while Ilora followed, sullen as ever, though free as her master. "Don't be afraid. There's no harm done, unless you hurt yourself when you introduced that little melodramatic effect of your own. And if friend Cralla's headman had not been so slow in putting out the light that would not have happened. When they were tying up Ilora would have been a better time."

Miss Severoid heard through a fog. A black, fan-

tomlike figure passed her, then another, and so swiftly did they merge into the darkness they seemed to vanish into the ground.

Clinging to Clavering as though she feared that if his support were withdrawn she would surely fall, and still feeling the limp touch of Maybrick's fingers as they had brushed her elbow she asked in an awed whisper that distinctly said she was afraid of the answer.

"Wh-what did they—do—to him?"

"Administered a sort of anesthetic so that he would not feel the pain of parting with us so much," Clavering returned easily. "It's quite harmless—in single doses. Induces about ten hours' sleep and most pleasant dreams—like opium, you know. So his journey to Basanna, per hammock, should be rather comfortable. Don't be alarmed. It isn't your hammock. Explanation entirely satisfactory?"

Miss Severoid's head cleared a little, but strangely uncertain and uncanny sounds emanating from the gloom behind her made her a little dubious about the truth of her companion's tale.

"Bu-but why did you let him go so far? If you had those people waiting about you could have—"

"Achieved the same result with much less personal discomfort. True—but it would never do to have him suspect when he awakes that you had a hand in it. You hope to go back to civilization, I suppose, and I thought it best to impress the poor chap that you had been a help to him. Judging by the way he apologized to you, I imagine he thought you had. You see, I have to be careful in matters of that sort, that the responsibility and suspicion will fall solely upon me and not upon—my friends. Which forces me to be rather elaborate sometimes."

He spoke wearily as if these details tired him. Halting he said quietly:

"You can tell Maybrick when you see him again that I was not at all unpleasant to you, but helped you on your way—which isn't altogether untruthful, is it?" His eyes glowed at her in the dark, almost as luminous as a cat's. "I shall leave you here, and you need have no fears on the lieutenant's account. Get as much sleep as you can to-night, because to-morrow is going to be rather tiresome. Still doubtful about anything?"

"No—that is—I don't think so. Sh-shall I see you again before—"

"I'm afraid not. There is nothing I can help you with now any better than Cralla. Afterward—I shall come to see you. Good night, Miss Severoid! Ilora will see that you reach the village in safety. Ilora—*wah!*"

And that was all he said.

Miss Severoid felt the gentle pressure of his fingers as the Jackrie girl came to his side, and almost before she had gathered voice enough to return his soft "Good night!" he was gone.

Ever since that night in Segwanga, when he had held out his arms to her and she had coquettishly refused their invitation after leading him to believe that she might do so, he had not once made any overtures of that kind. Which gave Miss Severoid food for serious thought as she followed the sulky Ilora back to Mayona.

She had drawn two strong men into her service, and that each would undoubtedly come to claim his reward when "it was all over" was as inevitable as the dawn. But she scarcely thought of McClure in that finale—only of Clavering.

She could not tell what he might do, particularly since he had become so quiet and serious about her.

Clavering in flirtation could be handled, but Clavering in passionate earnest was an entirely different thing, and almost sure to be dangerous.

Consequently, in spite of his advice, Miss Severoid did not sleep very well that night. She had sowed desperately and was becoming afraid of the reaping.

Maybrick, on the contrary, slept very well indeed. So did his Yoruba orderlies, but the latter were not a part of the silent little procession that marched swiftly through the night toward Basanna. They were too much trouble to carry.

So that Chief Tomi, without having been in any way responsible for their disappearance, got his targets, after all!

Which is the rest of what Clavering meant when he told Miss Severoid that he had to be careful to protect his friends. He might have added:

"And feed their lusts to keep them."

But it may be remembered, at the same time, that these orderlies had treated Cralla like a sack of yams.

CHAPTER XXVI

ON TO TULAMI!

McClure had noted Maybrick's absence from Tomi's compound very shortly after the lieutenant had gone. But he did not bother about it then.

Afterward, when he was sure that Providence alone could intervene on behalf of the carriers, and that he had done all he could for those whose hours were numbered, he retired to the hut which had been assigned to him, leaving Tomi, who was bubbling with charity, to keep his women at the unwelcome task of attending the sick and preparing graves for the dead.

Observing that Miss Severoid's hut was in darkness, McClure presumed that she was asleep, and when he learned from Plymouth that Maybrick and his orderlies "done go for bush," he sat alone for a long time pondering the possible reasons that might have led the lieutenant to march voluntarily into the bush at night with two unarmed orderlies. But he did not arrive at any very satisfactory conclusions, and, having no particular reason for constituting himself as Maybrick's keeper, he finally dozed off, vaguely wondering whether Cralla's absence had anything to do with the matter.

He was afraid it had. Next morning, finding that Maybrick and his Yorubas were still missing, he was sure of it, particularly when he found Cralla in Tomi's compound counting the survivors.

There were fifteen. Exactly half of Cralla's force

had either bolted or succumbed, and those that were left—with the exception of the head man and one or two other unlovely brutes who looked as if they could drink vitriol and live—did not appear to be anxious or capable of continuing the journey.

McClure looked them over, pursed his lips, pulled upon his mustache for a minute or two, then shot a sudden and inquiring glance at Cralla.

"Well?"

Cralla wrung his hands and moaned, and Chief Tomi tried to look sad, too.

"Be my money!" Cralla chanted dolefully. "Where I go get money to buy fifteen more carrier man? *Yella! Yella!* There be *juju* for my head! And I no do nothin' bad to no man!"

He made queer noises with his tongue and swore in Jackrie, Sobo, Beni, and Ejau—strange oaths that were an anathema upon the bones of the departed carriers and their remotest ancestors.

"What are we going to do?" McClure interrupted when he became tired of the jumble.

Cralla did not know, but Tomi, good friend that he was, suddenly bubbled over with good-natured assistance, and offered as many of his boys as were necessary to fill the gaps—then looked toward McClure for a sign of practical appreciation.

But the trader, with an idle glance round about, ignored the implication, and watched the village yawn and stretch and crawl from its sweltering slumbers back to the squalid reality of another day.

Looking sharply at Cralla again he asked abruptly: "Where—government man?"

Cralla did not betray so much as the stirring of an eyelash, and his wailings did not cease.

"He go back to Basanna," he said in the same whining tone. "I t'ink he be *juju*."

McClure did not believe that, but he knew it would be worse than useless to attempt to probe the matter any further. He went to have breakfast with Miss Severoid, feeling anything but satisfied with her expedition. He was sure that Maybrick had come by a most untimely end.

But he tried to shield the ugly thought from Miss Severoid when she asked very promptly as he entered her hut:

"Where is the lieutenant?"

"Gone back to Basanna, I believe. Cralla says so. Sleep well?"

"Oh—yes—splendidly, thanks!" Miss Severoid lied jerkily, trying not to look as relieved as Cralla's explanation of Maybrick's departure made her. "Are—are we moving to-day?"

"I believe so." His glance was very searching. "You look pale and tired and frightened. Becoming a little too much for you, isn't it?"

"Oh—no—no, really!" she protested. "And here comes Ilora with the hot water for my tea. I shouldn't let you see me till I've had my first cup—and these stuffy little places are not just the best aid to the complexion. Why aren't you wearing your eye-shade? Your eyes are still inflamed quite a lot, and I'm sure they must hurt."

"No. Nothing to speak of. They're all right now."

McClure permitted her to examine his eyes more closely and tried to smile in the teeth of what he believed had happened to Maybrick, but Miss Severoid did not fail to detect his uneasiness. Sensing the cause, she took a firm grip upon her nerves and voice and declared deliberately, as Ilora served the sickly-looking Delta eggs:

"I am not sorry the lieutenant has gone back, be-

cause I was afraid he was going to be terribly officious and not let us go any farther if I wouldn't—wouldn't let him—make love to me! He—he came back last night after you'd both gone out and—and—" She stopped and allowed McClure to read the rest of it in her face. "Perhaps that was why—he went back. But you—you mustn't ever—tell any one I told you."

Which was some of the truth, at any rate, and the time was not ripe for full and complete confessions. Afterward—she hoped the justification for what she had done would be plainer.

McClure's hands clenched on his knees and black thunder-clouds came and hung over his eyes.

"Don't!" Miss Severoid pleaded softly. "I don't like you when you look like that."

But McClure did not speak, nor did his face become very much clearer for the remainder of the meal; and Ilora, who feared him and loved him, and watched him surreptitiously at all times with her own crude conceptions of hero-worship, exulted because she thought his very evident displeasure was directed at Miss Severoid.

The girl had not for an instant given up hope of seeing Miss Severoid's wonderful white skin quiver under the mutilating lash of a hippo-hide wielded by McClure.

There was no further mention of Maybrick, and none whatever of Clavering. McClure, however, appeared to be thinking very deeply, even as he shared the burden of an inconsequential conversation that had nothing to do with the expedition's purpose and difficulties.

Since Miss Severoid had put a chain upon his tongue in Basanna, McClure had relapsed without a murmur into his former attitude of courteous solicitude in which there was a vein of big-brotherly authoritative-

ness, with its consequent angle of shoulder-shrugging indifference to her whims.

But there was not a waking moment in which he did not ask himself what Clavering's intentions were. The nearer they drew to Benin City the more poignant the question became.

Undoubtedly Clavering had a definite object in view, and McClure, judging the man by his past performances, could gage the nature of the object with a fair degree of accuracy.

Maybrick's "indiscretion" served only to accentuate Clavering's possible purpose, and McClure thought of it with the sensations of a man who goes to his death with his revolver in his belt and his hands tied behind his back.

He alone stood between Miss Severoid and the outlaw's smooth but terrible machinations; yet he could do nothing to assure her safety until her desperate whim to enter Benin City had been satisfied.

Again and again he had employed round oaths to condemn his own colossal folly for allowing such an insane purpose to be credited with even the faintest shadow of his approval; and then he would study Miss Severoid's face for a minute or two and mutter, *"mafisch!"* with all the fatalism of a Sudanese camel-driver.

The march to Tulami began shortly after seven o'clock to the accompaniment of much screeching and gesticulation upon the part of Mayona's more-than-half-naked population. Tomi was bubbling over with good wishes, and the last McClure saw of him was in the shape of a large black blot in the foreground of a group of filthy and emaciated villagers, some of whom were dressed for the occasion in the festival attire of a loin-cloth.

And then they vanished behind a clump of green,

and the mocking screech of their farewell died into a whispering silence as the expedition, like a great snake, wound its twisting way in single file along the narrow bush path to Tulami.

In some places Miss Severoid's hammock barely managed to squeeze through, and as the bearers tugged upon it, it resembled a rowboat in a choppy sea. But its occupant had become accustomed to these discomforts, and they afforded her a mild speculative interest, inasmuch as she was almost constantly wondering when the thing would overturn and precipitate her into the underbrush among the snakes and centipedes.

McClure marched behind, with Ilora and Plymouth bringing up the rear, and there were many times when the head of the procession was invisible to the tail. Upon one of those occasions, with Maybrick's disappearance still troubling him, the trader turned his head and beckoned the watchful Ilora with a nod.

The Jackrie girl trembled and the whites of her eyes became suddenly prominent. He had never spoken to her before, and ever since the evening on which she had wielded a hurricane lantern with such deadly effectiveness, she had lived in constant dread of detection by McClure himself.

But she squeezed her way obediently to his side with an impudent show of indifference.

McClure regarded her carefully for a minute or two before he spoke.

"Why you wear your cloth—so?" he asked in a low monotone, fixing her with a look that permitted no prevarication and indicating her unusual method of fastening her overcloth over her shoulders instead of under the arms.

All Ilora's indifference vanished. She wilted instantly and writhed from the question in a new-born shame—a sensation entirely foreign to her. The

marks over her shoulder blades, which her overcloth was intended to hide, burned again fiercely and seemed to screech aloud the fact that she, Ilora of Warri, favored among her womankind, had been tied hand and foot like a branded slave and flogged.

"Flog palaver—eh?" McClure suggested mildly, since she did not answer. "You be wife of bushman who flogs his wife like slave. I think you be Warri girl?"

Ilora's head drooped. She made no reply, and none was necessary. Her disgrace, all the more keen because McClure had detected it, was plainly written in her face. They jogged silently along for another space in the wake of the twisting line of carriers and Miss Severoid's reeling hammock, which, if it did not screen McClure from Cralla's watchful eyes, served to hide Ilora's presence at his side.

Plymouth came slouching on like a dog at the heels of his master.

"You be Cralla wife?" McClure asked Ilora softly after a while.

She nodded reluctantly, with her eyes fixed upon the yellow clay under her feet. And she knew that the nod was an admission of the fact that it had been Cralla who had used the hippo-hide, since no one else would have dared to do so.

McClure waited a minute or two, contemplating Cralla in a new role. Then his hand closed firmly but carefully about the girl's arm. She made no protest; in fact, she subsided so peacefully into his grip that he marveled at it, and her queer little grin of satisfaction was better understood as her glance traveled exultantly to the rocking hammock.

McClure noted that, too, and considered her guardedly for several more minutes ere he felt safe to whisper.

"Government man go back to Basanna?"

Ilora looked up swiftly, then away again. And then she nodded as though afraid some one might see her.

"Last night?" McClure persisted, confident that the girl was speaking the truth and that Miss Severoid could not hear.

Another nod, more vigorous than the previous one; and McClure breathed more easily, and marveled that Miss Severoid's explanation of Maybrick's departure should have been, after all, the correct one!

He thought of asking Ilora why Cralla had flogged her, but feeling sure that she would not tell him the truth upon that matter—because a Jackrie is always punished for "doing nothing"—he patted her on the shoulder, told her she was a good girl and allowed her to resume her place in the rear again.

She complied so reluctantly that he marveled still more. Turning his head a few minutes later as he mopped the perspiration from his face and forehead, he caught her watching him with a savage and pitiful sort of admiration that was disturbing.

But he faced front again without a word. Glancing upward occasionally through the tangle overhead for a sign of rain, he plodded steadily on behind Miss Severoid's hammock, moodily speculating upon the immediate future beyond Tulami.

Reaching Tulami was a sizzling, monotonous, patience-testing business. There was green on the right and green on the left and a twining, lumpy ribbon of a path between. So far as Miss Severoid was concerned, when the tramp was begun again after the noonday rest, even the snakes had lost their interest and she had a vague desire to see leopards and elephants and hippopotami—all at a safe distance, of course—*anything* that would create a little diversion from the steady, scuffling plod of the carriers who

slouched along with but one aim in view, and that to be rid of their packs as quickly as possible.

But there is surprisingly little diversion in the daytime when one has become accustomed to the scrawny Delta monkeys' antics and to the fact that one is shut in from all the world, entirely at the mercy of one's carriers and guides.

Sometimes a carrier is bitten by a centipede and creates a little excitement as he bolts for the whisky, with the result that he dies gloriously drunk or that the alcohol saves him. But occurrences of that sort are rare, and in those days the most treacherous thing in the Beni country was the Beni himself.

When the hammock would permit, Miss Severoid thought principally of the fact that within twenty-four hours she would know the best or the worst. And when one has been striving for months to make the impossible probable, one knows what is meant by "the last long weary mile that makes the journey's end," more particularly when the journey's end is the walled city of Benin.

There were moments when Miss Severoid's mouth was a knifelike line—when her lips had no color in them and her eyes were devoid of life; and then, as the hammock would jolt perilously and threaten to overturn, she would start from these unhappy reveries, clutch at the straps and pray.

Her surroundings were becoming wilder and wilder at every turn, and the stragglers they passed were more weird as to head-dress and more fearsome in their face markings than the people of Mayona. The problem of clothes had thinned out to the airy edge of nothingness.

And McClure could see the fear of Clavering in every face; saw mothers with their babies on their backs burrow into the bush out of the way the moment

they caught sight of Chief Cralla, whose power lay solely in the fact that he was Clavering's agent.

But Cralla, as usual, looked neither to right nor left nor behind him; neither did he falter nor slacken his pace; but driving the carriers relentlessly on before him he herded them into wild Tulami shortly before sunset, just in time to escape the storm that, if only upon account of the twenty-four hours of time it wasted, is worth remembering.

It proved to be of vast importance when the climax was reached.

CHAPTER XXVII

WITHIN THE GATES

It rained all night, a steady downpour that made the intended midnight advance on Benin City an impossibility and necessitated a twenty-four-hour sojourn in Tulami that was far from pleasant.

That the place made Taomi and Basanna and Mayona seem clean by comparison; that Miss Severoid's hut swam in several inches of water before morning; that she had to sit all night upon a wabbly deal board slung across two empty kerosene cases and had to wear an oilskin coat and hat and McClure's rain-boots; that the lightning flashed and the thunder roared and the world seemed ready to give up the ghost at any moment—these were little things compared with the fact that Benin City and Ralph—her Ralph! were just a few hours away, and she could not go on.

And when morning came and she learned that she must spend one whole, useless day gasping in the midst of unspeakable odors within the smothering confines of the insalubrious hut, she laughed hysterically up into McClure's face, gripped his arms and clung to him in a frenzied sort of way that made him go rather white. He muttered incoherent words of sympathy and patted her soothingly on the head as though she were a child.

Ilora, always near and always watching, blasphemed in silence, and then going out and capturing a lizard with a golden head and a tail the color of blue-black ink, she held it captive within a triangle of mango

twigs; gave it to eat and to drink, muttering a weird incantation into its ear. Then she flayed it over a slow fire and waited for its spirit to wreak vengeance upon Miss Severoid.

She waited all day. Judging by the ghostly pallor of Miss Severoid's cheeks, the nervous twisting of her mouth, her constant moving to and fro, her efforts to sleep that were useless and the manner in which she slowly but surely tore a small and innocent handkerchief to shreds, it seemed as if the sacrificed lizard's spirit was really gnawing at her heart.

But Ilora knew nothing of nerves and their vagaries. Nor did she know of the leagues and leagues Miss Severoid had traveled over all manner of impassable barriers—or of the planning and the praying, and the flirting and the lying and the smiling she had done while her heart was being tortured by the agonizing hours and weeks and months of hoping and yearning for the sound of a voice and sight of a face that were dearer to her than life itself.

And that final day of waiting at Tulami was the worst. It dragged interminably, each hour like a thousand years; a broiling, choking day of chilling fears and wild, unreasonable hopes that soared to the zenith of the impossible, then sank again with nauseating suddenness whenever she recalled to mind the name of Daka.

McClure watched her curiously and anxiously, and did his unhappy best to direct her interest toward all manner of things—except Benin City, about which he had his own opinions and misgivings. But his efforts as an entertainer upon that day were doomed to failure. Miss Severoid would meet his eyes and smile and seem to be all attention, and then she would be looking beyond him northward, and his words would fall upon barren places.

Cralla was not seen all day, so it was presumed that he was taking advantage of the delay in sleep.

The natives grunted and screeched and squabbled and wallowed in pestilential filth, dragging their disease-infected bodies through the daily grind of existence, and clinging to their squalid, narrow lives with considerably more tenacity than those to whom Cape Town is but a suburb of London.

And then the darkness came and the screeching and the squabbling gave way to a low murmur that finally died into a morbid and nerve-wrecking silence; that silence that is more destructive than a riot.

It was then that McClure had to sit by Miss Severoid's side on the deal-board seat, and gripping her hands, prevent her from attempting to reach the walled city of Benin alone.

She did not see why she could not. It wasn't far—just a few miles through the dark—and *he* was there, waiting for her to come to him and take him home. Clavering had said so and surely Clavering knew!

She *would* go! She would! She would!

With which she stamped her small right foot and attempted to elude McClure's substantial bulk as she bolted for the door.

Whereat the trader cast convention aside, and seizing her in his arms, carried her, struggling and moaning, back to the deal-board seat, where, drawing her head into the hollow of his shoulder and holding her so that she could not move, he scolded her and petted her and, as he mentally phrased it—"made a ruddy blubbering fool of himself"—to the lasting amazement of Plymouth and the destruction of Ilora's hopes.

Presently Miss Severoid was calm again. That is, the violent fit of frenzy and aguelike trembling that followed it subsided, giving way to the mercy of silent tears which she shed into one of the pockets of Mc-

Clure's service shirt. After that she felt much better, though she had difficulty in looking the trader straight in the eyes.

But McClure, who made no comment upon her conduct, treated her as if it had never been, asked no questions, and remained steadfastly by her side dispensing optimism till Cralla came.

The chief, whose expression did not indicate anything in particular, had very little to say; simply that whenever Miss Severoid was ready they would go on. Miss Severoid having been awake and ready for at least thirty hours, there was no more time lost on her account.

So with the simple preliminary of seeing that there was enough oil in the lamps and that Miss Severoid got into the hammock quite safely, Cralla's headman, in the capacity of lamp-boy, led the little body of adventurers out of Tulami upon the final and most gloomy lap of their adventurous journey.

The carriers were left behind, but Ilora and Plymouth were in their usual places at the heels of McClure, whose right hand rested upon the butt of his revolver and remained there.

He had no illusions about the outcome so far as his own fate was concerned. With his eyes wide open he was going to what he believed to be certain death, and his only hope was that he would have an opportunity to make it a swift one. To be food for Daka's amusement did not appeal to him at all.

Of Miss Severoid's future he did not dare to think. When he did his fingers itched on the revolver butt. Cralla's life was in jeopardy many times during those three silent hours when, for the greater part, the swish and rustle of the chief's cloth about his ankles was the only sound in the world.

Several times the ominous snarl of one of the larger

wildcat family made Miss Severoid feel chilly. It was then that the deepest silences fell. The bush dogs ceased their eery yelping, and the squealing monkeys climbed rapidly higher and remained very quiet in a quaking fear. The leopard likes monkey meat and he can climb a long way to get it.

The path became a little broader, permitting McClure to walk comfortably by the side of the hammock. Every little while he whispered words of comfort to its pale-lipped but hopeful occupant, who was shielded by a gauzy mosquito curtain from the mosquitoes and sandflies and other more deadly things that flew and lived upon human blood.

In a very few minutes, in spite of the curtain, a small soft hand came out, groped in the darkness for a little while, and, finding McClure's left, clung to two fingers of it with the tenacity of a leech and the simple faith of a child.

The trader straightened a little and his grip upon the revolver butt tightened. The whole world seemed to be waiting and listening to hear the deep and silent breath he drew.

Presently, just a few minutes after an unfriendly bush-cat had run foul of Cralla's headman, and had been lucky to escape alive before the other lamp-boy's machete finished him, Cralla swung round a bend in the path that brought them under the shadow of the city wall—a bend that, upon one occasion, was the scene of much slaughter when an ill-advised, gift-laden peace expedition to Benin City was treacherously betrayed and almost annihilated.

So peaceful an expedition was it that the seven white men who composed it had their revolvers safely stowed away in their traveling cases, to avoid the temptation of using them. Their only weapons were short walking-canes. The spirit of the Beni may be better under-

stood when it is said that with these walking-canes, assisted by a considerable number of unarmed Kroo-boys who were laden with gifts for the chiefs of Benin, the intrepid little company repulsed the greasy Beni hordes time and again, till these naked savages, piling up the dead and wounded Kroo-boys across the path, used them as a barricade, and wreaked still more death and destruction in the ranks of the peaceful.

Two of the white men and several of the Kroo-boys escaped—but only one of the whites reached civilization with his reason unimpaired.

Another white member of the peace party lived to be taken into Benin City alive, and his black boy, who managed to escape, reached Saloko and crawled into a trader's office whining and laughing alternately and jabbering irrationally about crucifixion and—other things.

Sick and heart-broken, seated upon his traveling case with a red stream trickling down his face from a wound over the temple, while the mad Beni horde pumped pot-legs and rusty nails from their ancient muzzle-loaders into the helpless pack of the Kroo-boys —the leader of the expedition was asked by his feverish Kroo-boy attendant if he wanted his revolver.

He shook his head slowly, looked up through the blood and the smoke, and sat quite still—waiting.

And when it came it found him ready—the martyr of an idea of his own—peaceful to the last.

From the bend to the city wall was no great distance, and Cralla did not hesitate a moment until he came to the narrow entrance that was really an arcade, leading through the solid breadth of the huge wall of mud.

It has been claimed that the wall was as broad as it was high. When a chief of Benin died his wives and family and slaves and the wives and family and slaves

of his successor congregated upon the top of the wall where the ghastly funeral rites were performed, after which the wives and slaves of the deceased who had been sacrificed as a tribute to the dead were hurled with their late master into the reeking trench that encircled the city upon the outside of the wall.

And that was all the burial they received.

At the narrow little entrance Cralla halted, waiting for McClure and the hammock bearers to come up with him.

The wall rose sheer and black into the darkness overhead; but the unsteady light from the lanterns helped to outline the entrance, which, dark and subterranean as it seemed, was apparently unguarded. But perhaps Daka thought that the awful stench that arose from the burial ditch curving away to right and left of the path would be sufficient to keep the idly curious white man away from his door-step.

It made Miss Severoid sick and faint. As she came somewhat uncertainly out of the hammock she was glad of the support of McClure's arm while she gathered her scattering senses and realized that at last she was to see Ralph again—to hear him speak—to hold him in her arms—

She saw McClure draw his revolver slowly from its holster. The deliberateness of the action suggested very plainly the danger into which she had led him, made her gulp and swallow once or twice, and halt her pæan of joy until they should be all safely out of the wood.

Cralla muttered something in Beni to the hammock bearers, who grunted in reply and retired a few paces, apparently not at all annoyed at being left outside.

"No make noise," Cralla whispered to everybody in general, but looked directly at McClure, whose eyes were everywhere at once, searching the opaque shadows

for the first sign of treachery. "I go first. White mammy follow. We no need Kroo-boy. Sof'ly, sof'ly. *Wah!*"

And without another word or a moment of waiting he dived into the tunnel-like passage through the wall in the wake of the lamp-boys.

Miss Severoid was the first to make any move in pursuit, and there was little hesitation about her manner of doing so. Her limbs grew strong again in a second, the faintness passed, and some of the frenzy of that day came back to her.

A queer little sound—half cry, half sob—escaped her. Suddenly lifting McClure's left hand to her lips, she kissed him blindly on the thumb-nail, then dragged him after her into that city of a thousand hells.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE EXCHANGE

McCLURE went willingly.

He was tingling to the roots of his being; though, judged solely upon its merits as a kiss, that hasty effort of Miss Severoid's was nothing to brag about.

As he vanished through the gateway he called whisperingly to Plymouth: "Wait till I come out." The Kroo-boy replied with an unintelligible grunt that might have meant anything. Fumbling at his waist-cloth, he gripped the haft of an ugly knife and obeyed.

But he drew away from the hammock bearers, who were Benis, and therefore to be held in contempt.

Drawing her overcloth tighter about her neck, Ilora grinned in a sickly, enigmatical sort of way and followed McClure, while the hammock bearers, also grinning most significantly, squatted on their haunches, produced their pipes, and made ready to wait in comfort.

The Jackrie girl had seen the revolver in McClure's hand. As she trod almost on his heels while they passed into the city her attention was attracted solely to the glint of the weapon, as though she had a personal interest in it.

There did not, however, seem to be any need for the revolver. Not that there were not shadows and mystery and the constant threat of dangers unseen. The very fact of the place being Benin City created those, both real and imaginary.

But the whole city—which was not so large as the name implies—seemed to be very sound asleep, and there was not a soul in sight to challenge any one. In fact, the entrance was accomplished so simply that it was dangerous; at least McClure thought so, and his eyes were darting about him swift as lightning.

They had not very far to go; scarcely fifty yards. They passed a few straggling, outlying huts to a slightly larger hut before which Miss Severoid quickly detected a light.

Her heart was beating like a trip-hammer, and she had no thought of danger. She was following Cralla and his lamp-boys with the sensations of one who hoped and pleaded for much at their hands and was consequently feeding her hopes upon every step that drew her nearer and nearer to her heart's desire.

The lamp-boys made directly for the compound with the light which came from a small lantern held by a black colossus whose height and girth equaled McClure's, and whose hideously marked face made Miss Severoid shudder as the lamplight fell upon it.

But he was as meek as a lamb. At a word from Cralla he turned instantly about and led them across the compound, past shadowy, sleeping forms of natives, and under vague, uncanny shapes of things that looked like human heads hanging by the hair from an invisible rope.

As least, Miss Severoid thought that, and her heart grew leaden and sank with nauseating suddenness.

What if they were too late? What if Daka had learned that Ralph was not black, but white? Perhaps —perhaps Ralph's head hung—

Her head became light. She saw Cralla and the lamps through a haze, and it was as if she were following them through space to the blackest depths of the bottomless pit. And then, somehow or other, they

reached the door of the hut, where their guide, mumbling something Miss Severoid did not understand, apparently wished them to wait while he disappeared inside.

He was gone less than a minute, but it was an eternity to the gray-lipped woman who leaned, sick and faint, against McClure, without being actually aware of the fact that he was there.

The whole business was all very quiet and mysterious; the air was heavy and dank and nauseous with unhappy odors, and out of that deadly, wheezing silence and those pitlike shadows anything might have come. So that it was not very difficult for Miss Severoid to suppose that the bunches of red-skinned bananas, suspended from a thin but tough rope of hide strips, were heads, particularly since her imagination was primed for that sort of thing.

McClure had not been illusioned, but in the second or two before the giant Beni reappeared and grunted an invitation to them to enter the hut, the trader committed his soul to his Maker.

Ilora, muttering unintelligible gibberish to herself behind him, seemed to be similarly employed. But when they went inside her mutterings ceased, and she stood gaping past McClure's elbow at the "white mammy," who, with an agonizing moan of joy and fear mingled, had instantly forgotten everything and every one, and had sunk to her knees beside a tawny-colored young negro who was perfectly bald and who lay in the center of the floor upon mats, with his eyes wide open in a glassy, unseeing stare.

The colossal guide stooped over him with his small lamp, and Cralla's lamp-boys added the light of their lanterns to help Miss Severoid see the young man's face more clearly.

And she quickly saw that though the face-markings

upon his forehead and cheeks were those of a Jackrie, the mouth and nose and eyes and chin were those of—Ralph Debenham!

His clothing consisted of a badly fitting gray shirt and an overcloth that was fastened about his waist, Jackrie fashion. There was no blanket or other covering over him, and there was no furniture of any kind in the room.

He made scarcely any sound and gave no sign of recognition, not even when Miss Severoid, winding her arms frantically about him and holding his head close to her breast, passionately kissed him again and again, and whispered chokingly that he should speak to her and know that she had come to take him home.

But he only moved his head a little and a wheezy moan of pain escaped him as if Miss Severoid's embrace hurt. So she laid him gently down again, and kneeling at his side, stared into his tawny face as though she had been turned to stone.

She made no outcry and shed no tears. But her eyes had become almost as glassy as Debenham's.

There was no emotion in Cralla's face. He seemed to be deliberately standing apart—just watching. He was apparently willing enough to wait a minute or two until the "white mammy" realized of her own accord that there was nothing she could do for the "small-boy white man" in that place.

The others just gaped, except Ilora, who now leered horribly. McClure, in stupefied wonder and pain, chewed his mustache, and, like Cralla, waited while Miss Severoid feasted her eyes upon Debenham's face as if she thought that she might hypnotically influence him to realize that she had come for him.

McClure faintly guessed what Debenham's malady was. He had seen men in that state of coma before, when their bodies had been racked with fever and pain

for weeks, and their minds had given up the struggle to live though their hearts beat faintly on.

The wonderful thing, McClure thought, was that Debenham was alive at all; more wonderful, indeed, than his tawny-colored skin and Jackrie face markings. The trader could understand the latter, because they were visible and tangible facts that were possible by the use of diluted mango-bark juice, charcoal powder, and probably black putty, though he had never heard of any one being foolish enough to attempt to seriously deceive the native with trickery of that sort.

Which made the fact of Debenham being alive all the more wonderful.

Yet, apart from the dangers of death that lurked in every nook and cranny of that filthy fever and scourge-ridden city, Debenham's life had but once been in danger of a violent end.

A badly-healed gash on his left shoulder, which was concealed by the ill-fitting shirt he wore, was the memento he had of that occasion.

From the moment he had entered Benin City as Cralla's slave he had not been allowed the satisfaction of fooling any one of any consequence except himself, and when he had been presumably sold to Daka, the chief had been perfectly well aware of the fact that the tawny skin of his new "purchase" was only make-believe; principally because Cralla had saved him the trouble of guessing the truth by previously advising him of it.

In which Cralla was more wise than treacherous.

Had Daka learned the truth of his own accord at a time when the chief of Akerri was absent in the south, Debenham's demise would have been a thing of beauty —that is, from Daka's point of view. And Cralla—or Clavering, rather—did not wish Debenham to die; not after he had wrested from the young daredevil the

story of why he needed money so badly that he had been willing to share with Cralla the five thousand pounds offered for his, Clavering's, capture.

Debenham's youthful intrepidity had amused Clavering, but the boy's story had given the outlaw an idea—one that was worthy of him; and when Clavering became possessed of an idea he usually saw it through to a successful conclusion.

This idea was really an experiment which was to begin by testing Debenham's courage and ability; to discipline him and to wean him gradually away from the habits and thoughts of his own kind, and finally, if the test were worthily met, to train him for purposes of his own.

Debenham, however, was not told anything about it, nor did he see the picturesque outlaw again after that one and only interview which had taken place in Tomi's hut in Mayona, to which Cralla and Ilora had carried him after the abduction in Akerri.

Clavering had said in conclusion:

"All right, youngster, I'll forgive you for trying to play Jonathan Wild at my expense. But you'll have to make your peace with Cralla for tempting him into danger. He's likely to get into trouble with the government over your disappearance, and he won't be very keen about your going back, because he's afraid you might tell people that he is a good friend of mine, and that wouldn't be very pleasant for him nor of much good to me.

"So it seems as if you are between the devil and the deep sea, and the only way out seems to become a bold, bad bandit like myself. But get a bit of sleep, if you can, and talk it over with Cralla in the morning."

And then Clavering had vanished. But he left the details of his idea with Cralla, who, with many maledictions upon Debenham's head, refused to trust to

his becoming a bandit or to release him or even to risk having a white man about his person.

So he put Debenham into a long sleep, and when the boy awoke again he was a blotchy, tawny color. There were puttylike marks on his forehead and cheeks, and he was wearing a dirty loin-cloth. He traveled in it to Benin City with Cralla, who "sold" him into slavery whether he liked it or not.

The test of Debenham's courage and ability to act had begun.

He met it without whining, shut his teeth upon his fate, unflinchingly faced the death he firmly believed menaced him on every side. And every minute of the day and night he hoped for a chance to escape—a chance that never came.

Although he made several little "breaks" in the playing of the part that had been thrust upon him, these slips appeared to pass unnoticed, and though he had the "luck" to become Daka's closest attendant, which kept him out of the swelter and the stench of the slave compounds, it never occurred to him that Daka was being sourly and somewhat unwillingly amused by having for a personal attendant a "small-boy white man" who was trying to be black.

Nor did Debenham dream that the beady-eyed, fat and greasy chieftain of all the Benis had given his word to Clavering that he would hold the "small-boy" in captivity until such time as the outlaw desired to free him.

Had Debenham known these things he would probably not have so far forgotten himself as to resent the lash of a hippo-hide across his shoulders one afternoon when Daka was in the sort of humor that usually ended in a blood-letting orgy, upon which the inhuman black mass of fat slept as innocently as a child.

But Debenham did forget his part, and badly, too, before Daka's eyes and upon Daka's person.

He remembered in that moment, as the wale across his shoulders stung like a red-hot brand, that he was white and that the hand that held the hippo-hide was —not. With the result that he instantly saw red. Flying like a wildcat at Daka's toadying head man, who had been ordered by the chief to administer the lashes in the "royal" presence, Debenham became possessed of the whip and used it indiscriminately.

Daka got some of it before the impulsive and suicidally reckless young man was brought down by a blow from a machete which, intended for his head, missed his ear by a hair's-breadth and stuck in his shoulder.

After which Daka, insane with rage, pronounced the death sentence by ordering him to the slave compounds—those that were to furnish the "material" for that evening's entertainment. Daka had no other course left to him. His prestige demanded it; but his prestige did not demand it half as much as he did.

And just before darkness and disaster fell, Clavering came.

He had been traveling at express speed for three days, and he had come only for Debenham, not because he thought the boy had shown courage and ability enough and had been sufficiently disciplined, but because his intention to have a tried and trained assistant had died very suddenly with the advent of Miss Severoid into Segwanga about a week before.

But he found Daka in a very ugly mood, and in no humor to release any one who had dared to use a hippo-hide upon his beefy person; and the more diplomatic and patient Clavering was, the clearer Daka saw that the outlaw wanted Debenham very badly.

Now, Daka was never so angry as to ignore anything that might be to his advantage. That was a trait in his character that helped to make him almost great.

He knew, too, that Clavering needed him quite as much as he needed Clavering. Benin City had sheltered Clavering several times, and the endorsement of Daka made the outlaw brother to a king.

In return for this Clavering heaped Daka with riches—with oil and ivory and slaves; with guns that killed at a great distance and with queer little *juju* stones that danced with a thousand fires or glowed like a leopard's eyes in the night.

Daka had no intention of losing those useful and pretty things, but neither had Daka any intention of allowing Debenham to go until he, Daka, had been recompensed for the injury to his dignity and his skin.

So Clavering and he made a bargain; or, rather, Daka made a bargain with Clavering that was really an ultimatum. The chief knew that, with Debenham sweltering and bleeding in a slave-hut, he held the upper hand.

For the sake of Miss Severoid, who had shed tears on his shoulder, Clavering agreed to fulfil his part of the bargain, and the boy was secretly removed from the slave compounds to Cralla's hut. In that place Debenham had awaited Cralla's coming with the price of his freedom.

He did not know why his living-quarters had been changed, nor had he any knowledge of Clavering's comings and goings. In the interval the ugly gash in his shoulder had not healed as it should have.

The broiling heat of the days; the suffocating humidity of the nights; the filth and the squalor and the choking confinement of the hut; the ignorance and subconscious brutality of his giant jailer and nurse, and

the loss of blood—all these things had combined to make the boy very ill indeed; so ill that even Daka became afraid he might die—before Cralla arrived with Clavering's part of the bargain.

However, Miss Severoid knew nothing of these things. She saw only Ralph—tawny-black, with hideous, puttylike lumps on his cheeks and forehead. His eyes had no life in them, and his lips were cold and irresponsive, no matter how passionately she kissed him or pleaded with him to speak to her.

McClure was trying to watch her and Cralla and every one at once, with rather dubious results. Immediately behind him, quite unnoticed, Ilora stood grinning with a peculiar, half-hearted exultation at Miss Severoid's grief.

Every few seconds her glance would switch quickly and furtively to McClure—particularly to his right hand, in which his revolver glinted menacingly.

Cralla was also giving some of his attention to the trader's right hand. Apparently it bothered him a little. He had not expected Debenham to be so sick that he could not walk, and he was afraid that McClure might offer to carry him out.

Which would be awkward and dangerous—for Debenham.

Then he said abruptly: "We go. Time pass too quick. Come."

He jabbered something hurriedly in Beni to the gigantic slave-driver, who instantly stooped and, with surprising suddenness and little ceremony, seized Debenham from Miss Severoid's frantic arms, lifted him up and, eluding the clutching fingers of the gray-cheeked woman at his feet, straightway carried him out.

Miss Severoid screamed, sprang up in a second, and with the look of a wild thing transforming her beauti-

ful face, she ignored the startled McClure—ignored everything—to run madly after the giant Beni and his burden.

Which proved that Cralla knew more about human nature than one would have supposed.

Miss Severoid was not thinking of what she did. It would have made no difference where the Beni had led—she would have followed.

And the Beni went swiftly, because that was part of the program; so swiftly that Miss Severoid had to run to keep up with him. She clutched at the brute's arm in an effort to stay him, but he paid not the slightest heed; only dragged her after him across the compound and out of it without a sign that he knew she was there.

McClure followed instantly—that is, about three seconds later.

But three seconds is an unconscionable long time sometimes.

It was quite long enough for Ilora to slip off her overcloth. Following McClure swiftly, the fear of death stifling the animal cry of anguish that came to her throat, she leaped suddenly forward and upward just as he stepped out into the compound, whirled the cloth over his head, and smothered him in its folds!

CHAPTER XXIX

THE RETURN

THE lights behind them went out.

A muffled oath came from the choking folds of the cloth. McClure's great bulk instantly fought for breath and to see. But in that second—and time was measured by very minute fractions then—a long, black arm came out of the darkness at his feet, slid a machete between his legs, and as he wheeled sharply and blindly to face the attack, he was hurled forward upon his face with a shock that put new stars into the firmament and deprived him of his wind, his revolver and the power to think.

Ilora sprang back, quivering and moaning because of the thing she, as the least to be suspected, had been ordered to do. In an instant the compound was alive with evil-smelling shadows of men, who to all intents and purposes had been asleep.

Hard and heavy knees pressed into the small of McClure's back. Several sweating, grunting brutes with arms of iron seized upon each leg and several more fought for the mastery of each arm. Clavering paid the trader's strength a compliment that was the result of personal experience with it.

McClure did not cry out or make any sound whatever; just writhed and twisted and gritted his teeth and exerted all the powers of his great body to throw off the increasing weight of the slimy beings who

whined and breathed with a wheezy, asthmatic sound that reminded one of pigs in a pound.

And then a soapy, wet, spongelike thing was clapped over his mouth and nostrils. He drew three gasping breaths in his struggle to escape the inevitable—and darkness fell.

In a moment or two more he was pinned down, hand and head and foot, like a lizard for the sacrifice.

But he had had no chance from the beginning; and Daka, to whom the price was paid, slept the notoriously peaceful sleep of one who, toiling not nor spinning, has made a splendid bargain.

"A white for a white" had been the sum of the bargain he had made with Clavering; and a large, perfectly healthy white man for a half-dead "small-boy" was undoubtedly a good bargain. Any one will concede that; particularly since Clavering had agreed that Daka could do what he liked with him.

It was the only bargain in the matter of Debenham's release that Daka, holding the upper hand, would make. Which possibly suggests another reason why Clavering so magnanimously suggested McClure as an escort for Miss Severoid, and why he had treated him so very nicely at Basanna.

He knew that Daka, after the manner of any other merchant, liked to have his goods delivered to him "in good order and condition."

Cralla was at no time engaged in the struggle with McClure, nor did he wait to learn the result of it. That was a foregone conclusion.

Clambering into a deserted section of the compound through a window on the right, and diving through a side gateway, he sped off in pursuit of Miss Severoid, who had temporarily forgotten that McClure existed.

Such thoughts as she had of the trader during those

agonizing moments while she pursued the Beni were very vague. "Somewhere behind" was the sum of them.

Fearful, unthinking, trusting no one, she ran at the slave-driver's heels, hearing uncanny sounds behind her to which she paid no heed; and saw nothing but a perfectly bald head and a tawny arm that swung limply over the Beni's shoulder.

She caught at the hand and held it and sobbed incoherent pleadings as she ran, asking herself chokingly if he would never speak to her—never look into her face and know that she had come all the way from London to take him home.

And then she heard the patter of naked feet behind her, and Cralla's voice, hoarse with terrifying tidings, came out of the eery darkness that enveloped them.

"Make quick! Make quick! Daka come and all man go die! *Ee-yaw! Yella! Yella! Yella!* Make quick! Daka come!"

Fear clutched at Miss Severoid's heart with an icy hand; not fear for herself, but for the almost lifeless burden the Beni carried, and when his pace increased, a silent prayer of thankfulness went up to Heaven. He could not go fast enough then.

Before she realized where they were going or why—with Cralla at her heels holding the threat of Daka's coming over her head—she was following the Beni through the pitch-black, tunnel-like gateway of the city, and in a few moments more was helping to place Debenham into the hammock, oblivious of everything but the wish to get him away from there with all possible speed.

And there was not a moment lost.

Cralla's hoarse, fear-filled voice dominated everything, lending the proper sort of atmosphere and incentive to hasty flight, and Miss Severoid did not stop

even to look around. Though they had no lamps she did not think of it, but clinging to the hammock straps she kept pace with the hurrying bearers—whose eyes were as good as a cat's in the dark—urging them on and on, always vaguely understanding that McClure was somewhere behind.

Plymouth did not follow.

Very much surprised at everything—confused by it in fact—having no knowledge of the reason for any of the excitement, except that the place was Benin City and that Daka was a name to fear, the whites of the Kroo-boy's eyes gleamed spasmodically like a revolving light. Clutching the haft of his knife with a nervous hand he waited for his master to come out, as he had been told to do; not because he was a hero exactly, but because McClure had pounded obedience into him with the weight of his good right fist.

Plymouth was just as afraid to go as he was to stay.

In a few minutes the lamp-boys, with their lanterns relit, emerged from the tunnel-like hole in the wall.

"Where is Mas' MaClu'?" the Kroo-boy asked at once and suspiciously, as the sound of Cralla's voice was dying into the distance.

But the lamp-boys only grinned and sped after the others, leaving Plymouth gaping and still more suspicious. When Ilora came out a little while later, sullenly and slowly, he leaped at her, and seizing her arm in a grip that made her squeal, held his knife at her throat.

"Where is Mas' MaClu'?"

Ilora drew a long, hissing breath. She had a healthy horror of dying—like that; and she could feel the point of the blade pricking her skin.

She had been trying to quiet her savage soul with the belief that she did not care whether McClure was sacrificed or not, and that the part she had played was

really something of which to be proud, since he loved the smooth-skinned "white mammy." But she had snatched his revolver from the Beni who had found it, saying Cralla wanted it, without, however, having any intention of giving it to the chief.

It was a toy and a fetish both, which she would play with and worship and perhaps use.

Her hand, under cover of her overcloth, was upon the butt at that moment, and Plymouth had no knowledge of how near to death he was as the girl, muttering in Jackrie to gain time, drew the weapon slowly from the waistband of her undercloth and, without bringing it into plain sight, turned the muzzle straight at the most of him.

But she did not shoot. She was afraid of the noise.

"Where is MaClu'?" the Kroo-boy demanded again in a hoarse whisper, his ears straining to catch the faintest sound, either hostile or friendly.

"He—fell—down," Ilora answered jerkily, and drew her head away a little from the knife point.

She spoke in Jackrie, with a few English words. "Many men came and leaped upon him. The 'White Mammy' and Chief Cralla and the lamp-boys ran. But I waited a while and I found this—see?"

She produced the revolver with such suddenness and thrust it into Plymouth's abdomen with such force that he gave vent to a thick grunt and simultaneously released his grip upon Ilora's arm.

The girl sprang back a pace, grinning. She was lithe as a puma and as swift, whereas the Kroo-boy was squat and rather slow to move, both mentally and physically. He stood stock-still, gathering his breath and his senses, and tried to understand all that the glinting weapon in Ilora's hand really meant.

Cralla's voice died away, and the city behind them was silent as the tomb. The scurrying of a bush-cat

through the underbrush, the frightened squeaking of an infant monkey overhead and Plymouth's thick, stertorous breathing were the only sounds that disturbed that morbid quiet.

"Da—Daka came—and caught—MaClu'?" the Kroo-boy asked in Jackrie at last in a bated whisper, staring stupidly and affrightedly at the girl.

"I think so. Many men came and jumped on his back and the 'White Mammy' and Cralla ran away. I waited a while, but I am but a woman, so I could do naught for Mas' MaClu'. But I found this 'shoot-palaver t'ing,' and I came away. Why do you threaten me with your knife? Do you not like me—a little?"

The Kroo-boy did not know whether he liked her much or little just then. But he did know that she had McClure's revolver in her hand, and that McClure was in Benin City with "many men" sitting on his back, and that if he, Plymouth, did not get away from there in a great hurry, he would probably have "many men" sitting on *his* back, too. Which was a prospect he did not care for at all.

So, being nothing more than a Kroo-boy, who had never heard of the boy who stood on the burning deck —and would not have understood or emulated his example if he had—he did the only obvious thing for him to do.

He shot one last, fear-filled look at the darkly ominous portals of the dread city, uttered a low, whining wail for the peace of McClure's soul—and bolted.

Ilora did not move for quite a while after that. A contemptuous grin faded with the dying away of the Kroo-boy's pattering feet. Her head sank between her shoulders, her knees sagged and she slipped into a huddling heap without a sound. There were no wailings and no tears.

Hugging the cold steel of McClure's revolver to her naked breasts, she writhed and twisted on the ground in a fearsome, savage agony, in which the grinding of her teeth and the sharp, hissing breaths she drew were the only sounds she made.

It was not a delectable performance, and it was all the more weird and ghastly because she was alone in that shroud of silence and darkness. Even the infant monkey overhead had stopped its plaintive squeaking, perhaps to watch the queer human below, whose eyes were ablaze and whose face was distorted in a hatred that was not good to look upon.

She breathed strange and awful curses upon Cralla and his house till it must surely have rocked upon its foundations, and she tore Miss Severoid limb from limb and cast her into the fire. Lying flat upon the ground, Ilora watched the white mammy's pink-white skin become black and shriveled, and grinned horribly at the sight.

A lizard scurried in flight from the bush and ran across her ankles. But she did not stir for several minutes after that. In fact, her grin broadened and she believed it a good omen, particularly if the lizard had had a golden head and a blue-black tail.

That was the hope upon her mind as she rose slowly to her feet and set off at a slouching gait in pursuit of Cralla and Miss Severoid, both of whom, judging by the look in the girl's eyes, were marked for slaughter.

Clinging to the hammock-straps, running a few steps, then walking and running again, Miss Severoid was nearer to Tulami than to Benin City before she even became suspicious of the fact that McClure was not "somewhere behind." She had gone on for a while in utter darkness, and then, ages afterward, the

lamp-boys came and led the way; which, of course, helped to encourage the belief that McClure was "somewhere behind."

And there was nothing very sudden about the manner in which the whole truth came home to her. It was a gradual process, beginning with a few doubtful looks behind. Then she saw Plymouth's squat figure a little to Cralla's right, which led to a frightened mental question, to alternating fears and hopes, and finally to the whispered calling of McClure's name.

To which there was no answer.

So she called it again, louder this time, in case he had not heard, and waited with bated breath for his reply.

Cralla paid not the slightest heed, but came on at the same driving pace, forcing the hammock-bearers to keep step with him. He did not even smile at the futility of Miss Severoid calling for a man who was in Daka's inhuman grasp—which was infinitely worse than if he were dead.

But Plymouth heard the white mammy call his master's name, and his sluggish mind struggled to decide whether he should presume to tell her that McClure was in "Benin Cit' with plenty men sitting on him back."

Plymouth was somewhat afraid of the white mammy, principally because he had seen that McClure and Cralla and the white soldier-man named Maybrick had always spoken to her very quietly, as if they were afraid of her, too. So, of course, if *they* were afraid of her, he, being only a Kroo-boy, was much more so.

"Mr. McClure!"

This time Miss Severoid stopped, tugged upon the hammock-straps, and forced the bearers to follow her example.

But only for a second. Cralla was so close behind

that he almost collided with them, and a harsh Beni oath sent them forward again, dragging Miss Severoid along whether or no.

"Stop!" It was very near a scream. "Stop, you beasts! I won't go a step farther! Mr. McClure!"

The hammock-bearers stopped. So did the lamp-boys and Plymouth and Cralla. The still figure in the hammock moaned, and the whimpering cry of a frightened bush-puppy answered it.

Something large and yellow and spotted, with eyes that burned green fire, crashed through the bush with a terrifying, blood-curdling snarl of rage; plunged as an arrow into the teeth of the very annoying lamps, wiped one of them and the boy who held it from its path like tissue-paper, and tore on into the bush upon the other side, considerably more afraid of its life even than Miss Severoid, who was so startled that she could not utter a sound.

A scream died in her throat, and she knew the need of McClure probably more than she ever had as she swayed against the hammock and saw Cralla's head man shed the light of his lantern upon the other lamp-boy. His face was a sickening red blur, and he lay upon his side in a crumpled heap, very, very still.

The startled and angry leopard's wild charge had knocked the breath of life out of his body, and a vicious side-sweep of its right foreclaws had torn half of his face away.

And it was that, as a climax to all that had gone before, that made Miss Severoid's heart come up into her throat and choke her as the flickering light of the solitary lantern went out, and she dropped into a darkness that was the color of deep-red blood.

CHAPTER XXX

THE AWAKENING

Miss Severoid had no knowledge of how she reached Tulami; did not even know that Debenham was carried there on Plymouth's broad back and she was given his place in the hammock.

When things became tangible again the filtering gray of the dawn had come, and she was lying in a camp-bed in a stuffy little hut, with Ilora in the foreground and Cralla looming darkly behind her.

There was no sign of McClure or Plymouth or Ralph, so that when the Jackrie girl, meek and mild as a nun, tried to make her drink something that had no taste she would have none of it.

Instead, with a riot of questions tumbling about in her head, she sat up suddenly and swept the dingy place with a single frightened glance. She heard a low, wheezy moan from somewhere behind Cralla.

Springing up without a thought of the consequences, she tottered dizzily past the chief, to sink heavily to her knees beside the startled Plymouth. He was kneeling by Debenham's side, applying cold cloths as per directions to the invalid's fevered forehead.

Debenham was lying upon mats, but with a blanket over him this time. Also, his tawny skin had given way to its proper color—or, rather, to a very pale yellow—which had surprised Plymouth very much, since he had carried an unknown Jackrie into Tulami and was now doing his clumsy best to nurse Marsden &

Co.'s vanished oil clerk back to consciousness. He had not witnessed the transformation.

Debenham's eyes were terribly sunken, his cheeks thin and wasted, his body hardly more than skin and bones. But since his color had changed there seemed to be a little more life in his face, though there was still no recognition in his look.

A pillow had been placed under his head, and another helped to make matters easier for his shoulder, the wound in which had opened again as a result of the jolting he had received. But it had been properly cleansed and dressed by a hand that had known what it was about.

He had also been gifted a new suit of pajamas. Mention of this is made partly because they fitted him, and greatly to instance that when Clavering planned he omitted nothing.

Miss Severoid could only guess who had wrought these vast improvements. When the bulging of the bandages betrayed that there was something wrong with Ralph's shoulder she made an instant examination and found that there was nothing she might have done that had not already been done—perhaps a little better.

So she simply knelt there for a while, biting her colorless, trembling lips, and tried to understand things better while she watched the spasmodic twitchings of the boy's mouth and the dull, lifeless look in his eyes.

Then, taking the cooling cloth from Plymouth's gnarled hands and placing it gently on Ralph's forehead, she turned her head to question Cralla. He had gone.

Ilora, however, was watching her with a quiet and friendly interest—dangerously friendly. There was no malice in the girl's look—not a trace of any—principally because that was no time or place to show it. She was sure that somewhere between Tulami and

Segwanga her chance would come as it had come before—though she had bungled it then—and she had no intention that there would be anything sudden about Miss Severoid's demise.

In fact, she would have liked nothing better than to make a night of it, just as she was sure that Daka would get several evenings' amusement out of McClure, who was big and strong and would last longer than the average mortal.

Ilora did not believe, however, that she would be so fortunate as to have one whole night of ecstatic joy at the expense of Miss Severoid's smooth, pink and white body. But she dreamed of an hour—just an hour!

Then she would shoot Cralla through the head, drink some of the clear white water out of a bottle she would find in his black, tarpaulin-covered carrier's pack, and drift into eternity, dragging Miss Severoid's machete-hacked body behind her.

It was a glorious prospect, and one worth waiting for.

"Where—where is he?" Miss Severoid whispered anxiously.

"Cralla go look carrier man," Ilora answered respectfully, and sounds of awakening life without seemed to bear out the statement.

"And—and Mr. McClure? Why doesn't he—why didn't he answer me when I called to him before"—she shivered—"before—it—happened?"

Ilora's face fell sympathetically. She shook her head.

"Mas' MaClu' no here. He fall down in Benin Cit' them time Daka come, and plenty man come and sit on him back so he no fit to get up. I wait li'l' bit, but I be so-so woman. I no fit to fight man. But I find dis shoot-palaver t'ing and I bring it to you"—and

here Ilora became ineffably simple—"'cause I t'ink you like Mas' MaClu' li'l' bit—no be so?"

And, producing McClure's revolver from the folds of her cloth, she held it out apologetically to Miss Severoid.

Thereby she earned Plymouth's sluggish approval, disarmed all suspicion against herself in the matter of McClure's downfall, placed the revolver into hands from which it could very easily be stolen when wanted, eliminated the danger of Cralla finding it in her possession, and, most important of all, created a bond of sympathy between herself and her mistress that would tend to make the latter a trusting victim when the former's trap was ready.

Ilora was not in Clavering's employ for nothing.

There was no strength or feeling in Miss Severoid's fingers as they closed about the proffered weapon. Fear and unbelief, and then a dull agony, came into her face—an agony that choked her. Her bloodless lips parted stupidly, and her cheeks became hollow in a moment.

She rose very slowly, holding her breath.

"He—he's taken—by Daka!"

"Yes'm! Daka come. He take Mas' MaClu' 'way."

Miss Severoid wavered a step or two, and an icy chill made her shudder violently. Her arm passed wearily across her eyes, and she groped a few uncertain feet; then stopped again and stood quite still—so very still and quiet that she might have been of marble rather than of flesh and blood.

The cries of waking children, the scuffling of feet, and the excited screech of men's voices were to her as vague murmurings that came from a great distance.

Ilora shuffled toward the camp-bed and grinned as

she made a pretense of rearranging the covers. Plymouth took the cloth from Ralph's forehead and replaced it with another. He was watching the "white mammy" out of the corners of his eyes at the same time, and looked rather frightened.

He saw her straighten and stiffen, and saw her lips and teeth come together with such deliberate slowness that there was no doubting the fact that she had come to a decision of some sort.

When she turned to Ilora again there was no fear or pain or any emotion whatsoever in her face.

"Tell Cralla I would like to speak to him, please."

Her voice was in keeping with her glance—quiet and decisive and unimpassioned.

Ilora looked as though she had made a serious mistake, and she did not meet Miss Severoid's eyes. They frightened her.

"Yes'm," she answered respectfully and slipped noiselessly out; and her respectfulness in this instance was not assumed.

Miss Severoid did not stir; did not even glance in Ralph's direction. She knew that if she did she would never retain the grip upon herself that was necessary for what she had to do.

But the mental torment of these few minutes of waiting was as nothing to what was to come.

Ilora came in again rather excitedly.

"Cralla no dere. He go 'way. I t'ink so he fear you an' go fin' Mas' Claverin'."

Miss Severoid winced, and the steely blue in her eyes gave way to a dull leaden color. But she uttered no word of protest and displayed no impatience; just put McClure's revolver away in her little uniform-case, moved quietly to a camp-chair, seated herself and—waited.

There was nothing else for her to do; only to wait

and—to think. The thinking seemed likely to drive her mad.

Whether Cralla had betrayed McClure into Daka's hands was not certain, but whether he had or not she knew very well that if McClure died in Benin City, she would have his murder upon her conscience as long as she lived. And she knew, too, that she had learned to love the big, broad man, whose trusting, patient and silent devotion had been even bigger and broader than himself.

Of course, he had joined the expedition of his own accord. She had not even asked him to accompany her; that is, not in words. But she knew what her eyes and her lips and her smiles had done. They had done it deliberately, too, just as they had enrolled Clavering into her service and betrayed Maybrick into the outlaw's trap at Mayona.

She did not try to shuffle from under the burden of her responsibility, made no excuses for herself, but faced the whole truth and writhed under its lash much more keenly than Ilora had done under the biting punishment of Cralla's hippo-hide at Basanna.

And yet the torturing excoriations of conscience and the sharp, knifelike stabs of pain that seemed to be tearing her heart and soul to shreds were not unmixed with mercy. For instance, she did not know that McClure had been the price paid for the pale-yellow, wasted boy who lay in the far corner of the room, moaning every little while as if to prove that he was still alive.

Had she known that, the possibility is that she would have gone quite mad, or at least have done something very, very desperate during that terrible hour of waiting, the minutes of which were heaped like leaden weights upon her shoulders, dragging her deeper and deeper into the darkness of despair.

Her eyes were heavy with lack of sleep, but nothing was further from her mind. The very mention of it would probably have made her hysterical.

Once, and only once, did she glance in Ralph's direction; but that was enough, though she did not go to his side in any haste or frenzy. She just knelt beside him quietly, and once more relieved Plymouth of his duties as nurse.

"All right. Thank you. You may go out if you care to. I'll manage."

"Yes'm."

The Kroo-boy rose and shuffled out with his hand upon the haft of his knife. He was not at all sure of his status since McClure was not there.

Ilora had gone out to prepare breakfast.

Ralph's moanings were becoming less wheezy, and his breathing was just a little easier. There was also a faint, a very faint, sign of life in his eyes.

Miss Severoid plied his forehead with cooling cloths with a calm that was much colder than the water in which the cloths were dipped. She watched the movement of his lips in silence, and once, looking at him very intently, it was as if she were asking herself whether or not he had been worth all that his freedom had cost.

Apparently she doubted it, and the doubt evidently hurt very much, because her mouth twisted with the pain of it and her glance flinched and shifted quickly and guiltily toward the door.

And then she heard a sharp, hissing sound and a feeble, startled cry, and, turning her head swiftly, she saw that the film had dropped from Ralph's eyes, and that he was affrightedly trying to rise.

The moment she turned her head, however, his struggles ceased. A nameless sound came from his throat, and he stared at her as at a ghost.

Her look softened instantly, and her firm lips quivered and broke in a smile that was filled with tears, and her hand went out almost timidly and touched his cheek.

"Ralph! Ralph, dear!"

Her voice was as the whispering of the leaves on a summer night, and Ralph's answer was a hideous grin. He thought it was part of his torment, and the screeching voices without lent color to the surmise.

"Ralph! Oh, boy, boy! Can't you see me? I've come to take you home!"

A hollow groan answered her. The boy's eyes searched her face wildly, and he tried desperately to get a grip upon his tongue.

"Bess!"

The name came wheezily and fearfully from his cracking throat, and in an instant later he knew that she was real as the passionate warmth of her lips pressed upon his own.

His good arm came weakly from beneath the covers and his fingers tremblingly felt her shoulders. Then, further assured that she was really there, the look of terror in his face died out, and his tired eyelids slowly drooped.

"Bess!" he whispered again, and again the proof of her lips was there as, with the sound of distant sobbing in his ears, he floated off into a new oblivion.

But this time he was asleep.

Neither of them saw Clavering in the doorway.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE RECKONING

THERE was a faint, flickering smile in the corners of the outlaw's mouth and a quiet satisfaction in his look that was not compatible with his cold-blooded betrayal of McClure.

Dressed as he had been when Miss Severoid had seen him at Mayona, there was an easy confidence in his attitude and a peculiar something in his face which accepted the dénouement he had witnessed with a sublime toleration that laughed softly at it even while his expression plainly said:

"There you are! I planned that. Pretty, isn't it?"

But he did not speak nor move till Miss Severoid, raising her head again, looked sharply around and saw him there.

Clavering was sure that he had never looked upon any woman one-half so beautiful as she was then, in spite of her tear-streaked cheeks.

Her great blue eyes were wide in astonishment, like a child's, and glistening drops hung upon her long, dark lashes like precious stones. Her lips, moist and warm and dangerously tempting, trembled uncertainly as she rose slowly to her feet, eying Clavering as though she were not sure whether to be afraid of him or not.

Certainly she was not afraid of him because of her deep, almost fanatical, interest in Ralph Debenham, the story of which may be told in a very few words.

To begin with, Elizabeth Severoid was only a part of her name. The rest of it was "Debenham," and, in very truth, hackneyed as the phrase may be, she was the only mother Ralph had ever known. In fact, this story really began when Miss Severoid—then known as Bessie Debenham—was seven years old—when she was passionately fond of dolls and given to spending most of her time playing with other people's babies. Because it was then that a perfectly new and wonderful baby boy was delivered at the Debenham home one truly dark and stormy night, when everybody was asleep or should have been. That baby was Ralph Debenham, and from that night onward little Bessie Debenham's childhood ended.

The death of her mother a few days later emphasized the fact, and though there was a sort of housekeeper-nurse in the Debenham home for several years after that, Ralph's real nurse and mother was his sister Bess. Everything that she had had been lavished unstintingly upon him. Year by year, her young-old hands had led him through childhood to boyhood—always standing between him and the just and unjust punishments that would have come his impulsive, tempestuous way—always giving without question and being absurdly jealous of her privilege in that direction—watching him add years to his age and inches to his stature with something akin to awe, yet never for a single moment thinking of him as a day older than the day on which she had taught him to walk.

So far an ordinary enough story, repeated every day the world over.

When Ralph was twelve their father died, and before very long it was evident that the boy was inclined to accept the absence of parental restraint as a sort of road to freedom. Which served only to intensify his sister's passion for mothering him; and she was so

busy keeping him out of trouble—or getting him out of it after he had succeeded in getting in—that she had no time at all to think of anything else.

Following her natural bent, she had taken up teaching as a profession, and, aided by a small annuity from their father's meagre estate, had managed to give Ralph, in the few succeeding years, the beginnings of a technical education which he was rounding out in a practical fashion when, from his sister's point of view, the whole world became darker than the darkest night.

Employed as an apprentice mechanical engineer, Ralph, always reckless and quick to anger, lost the noted Debenham temper, which he had inherited from his father, and punched a fellow-workman named Saunders into some moving machinery, disabling him for life.

Saunders had a wife and two small babies to support, and while Ralph was spending an ignominious, torturing year in prison, his sister spent an even more painful year outside of it, trying to believe that the truth was true! that Ralph—*her* Ralph—was actually in *jail!*

That year, however, gave her opportunity for more freedom of action than she had ever had since the day of Ralph's birth, and when that young man was released from prison, he discovered his sister—who had always been quite clever in amateur theatricals—teaching elocution in her spare time and conducting a full-blown school of dramatic art, simply because the Saunders babies had to eat!

It is doubtful if she thought about the babies' mother and father at all!

This dramatic phase of her career was responsible for the "shepherdess" McClure had coveted. She had been filling a gap in the cast of "As You Like It" by

playing *Phebe,* and liked the costume well enough to be photographed in it.

Ralph did not like the school of dramatic art idea very much, particularly when he learned of the nature of the necessity that had given it birth. Already marked with an indelible shame and, quite convinced that he was lost to society forever, yet another fire now seared his soul; but, gulping down an impulsive and impotent protest against everything in general, he determined to get some work to do, so that he could give all his wages to Saunders's wife, "even if I starve!" With which nineteen-year-old illogical determination he proceeded to look for the hardest thing in the world to find—some one who would pay a jail-bird wages for doing anything.

Nevertheless he found it.

The fever-ridden West Coast of Africa has been kind to such as he many times and, being in Liverpool at the time, he encountered Marsden & Co. and other West Coast firms who were nearly always looking for white flesh and blood and bones that could stand fairly erect, read, write and count—at least to a hundred. Marsden & Co. had made him the best offer, and before his sister knew anything about it, he had signed a contract and bound himself to serve the company faithfully and well for a period of two years for the sum of eighty pounds sterling per annum "all found."

Eighty pounds sounded munificent to Ralph then. It was just eighty pounds more than any one else would pay him, and he felt that if he paid Saunders's wife a pound a week, she could surely manage to exist on that till he was earning more. His intentions were truly excellent.

There was, of course, the inevitable scene between his sister and him; but the contract was there, signed,

sealed and delivered; and as there was no way out, his sister, bravely if very dubiously, made up her mind to allow him to go.

He sailed.

That the date happened to be April 1 may have had some significance; but in any case every week for a year Marsden & Co., Liverpool, were authorized to pay Mrs. Saunders, London, the sum of one pound, which was to be charged to the salary account of Ralph Debenham, assistant at Segwanga. Ralph had no knowledge of the fact that the money finally reached his proud sister's lap, and was being saved for him for the proverbial "rainy day."

"Miss Severoid" had not allowed Saunders and his family to depend upon her impulsive brother, but, continuing her dramatic work, had permanently made over one-half of her annuity to them.

And then one African mail-day, she received a letter from Marsden & Co. bearing the dreadful tidings that Ralph had completely disappeared. Finding that she could get no satisfactory explanation from the firm or from the Colonial Office, she decided upon the perilous and almost impossible task of going out to Segwanga to institute an investigation upon her own account.

Difficulties had confronted her at every turn—apparently insurmountable difficulties that would have crushed the spirits of a less determined soul. There were but two ways in which she could enter Nigeria—either as an employee or in the company of a husband, who would necessarily have to be employed there.

And she was actually seriously contemplating marriage with a Calabar commissioner when she read in a morning paper an appeal for lady missionaries to go out to West Africa to lead the benighted heathen out of darkness.

Promptly adopting the name of Severoid, she made

instant application for a place in Nigeria, and a reply came asking her to call at the office of the secretary of the Foreign Mission Society with references, *et cetera.* She could produce no references of the sort the society's secretary wanted, but she made love to his office-boy, to his clerks, to him, and finally to the chairman of the examining board; and, with her heart ready to break in two, flashed the magnetism of her smile upon that distinguished gentleman and drew his casting vote.

Then she confided in him, very, very quietly, telling him just why she wished to go to West Africa and where; and because he was that sort of man, she sailed for Segwanga with scarcely any trouble or delay.

The worthy chairman, however, did not know that she had been conducting a school of dramatic art, or that her brother had spent a year in jail. She was more afraid of the effect of the latter fact than of the former, hence her fear of detection when McClure had told her that he knew she had been a "shepherdess." As her dramatic work was so closely associated in her mind with the jail-term that had really been responsible for it, she had been desperately afraid that McClure must also know *why* she had been a "shepherdess." If he knew, it did not seem at all impossible that others might also know; which meant that if the truth leaked out, she would be recalled.

Until she had met Clavering and had heard of his deeds and powers, she had not dared to hope for anything, but she felt that the less every one knew about her real intentions the better, because if Ralph had come to any serious harm, another hue and cry was not likely to disclose anything more than the first one, particularly in a country like the Niger Delta.

Clavering's advent, however, had made almost anything possible, and, quick to realize that the more

"mystery" she assumed, the more interesting she became, she had deliberately allowed him and every one else to believe what they pleased, because the continued devotion and curiosity of men who might help was very necessary to her.

And now, facing Clavering in that musty little hut, with the screeching of Tulami's unclean population interjecting her thoughts and fears and pale-gray hopes, everything she had done to achieve her purpose rose before her to emphasize the fact that the hour she had dreaded most had come.

The shadowy smile of triumph playing upon Clavering's lips—a smile that lurked in the black mystery of his eyes—was an ominous quantity that was difficult to apprehend or cope with. Dabbing her eyes and nose hurriedly with her ever-ready handkerchief, she cast a fleeting look in Ralph's direction, then faced Clavering again with a suddenness that was startling.

"He—he's my—brother. You—you know that?"

Clavering inclined his head gravely.

"I guessed it. You see, he told me the story of why he left home and, of course, you were in it. He said you were very beautiful"—Clavering's eyes softened in keeping with his tone—"and that you had been more of a mother to him than a sister. So that it really wasn't much of a trick to guess who you were, particularly after I had learned that, aside from the gifts the gods have given you, the real secret of your power over all of us was just—motherliness."

Miss Severoid—and to avoid confusion of any sort we might as well continue to call her that, just as every one else in the Delta always did—was startled, and in spite of herself, showed it. Clavering's voice was too low—too softly modulated for comfort, and she did not care for sentiments of that sort coming from *him.* They were too revolutionary—suggesting that he

might be expecting her to "reform" him, and that he might become correspondingly maudlin in his "attack."

Which would not be likely to do McClure any good; and the knifelike stabbings of conscience did not allow her to forget the trader for a moment.

She did not wish to forget him. His fate and her own heart's ease in the future were synonymous. Feeling that his rescue from Daka's hands depended upon her alone, she knew that she would have to screen her real sensations from Clavering's eyes, and handle him with gloves of the smoothest sort.

Looking toward Ralph again instinctively, afraid that the noise outside would wake him, she saw that he slept quite peacefully. Then, mustering the talents with which she had been gifted, she faced the outlaw again.

"Ralph told you the story why he left home?" she asked with a note of incredulity in her voice.

"He did"—very quietly. "Told me of his experience with the law and of his efforts to get work afterward. I tried to make a companion of him, but he would have none of it. So Cralla, to protect himself, sold him to Daka. That was none of my business. I can't afford to be sentimental unless there is a good and sufficient reason for it."

He looked at Miss Severoid very pointedly, then came a little nearer.

"Then—you lied to me, and Cralla lied, too, when he said that Ralph had asked to be sold to Daka?"

Clavering shrugged his shoulders.

"Um—well—yes, I suppose so. Necessity, you know, is the mother of invention. I had to get you to trust Cralla, which you wouldn't have done if you had known that he had sold your brother into slavery for a mess of pottage. But the fact is that he"—nodding toward Ralph—"tried to bribe Cralla with half of that

five thousand that's offered for me to induce the chief to show him the easiest way to get a pot-shot at me. And Cralla kidnaped him. That's the whole story—a matter purely between the boy and Cralla. I interfered solely upon your account. You know that. You've known it from the beginning."

He looked directly at her, and paused while his hand went blindly in search of his cigarette case.

"Well; what's your answer?"

Miss Severoid smiled.

"Is that a proposal or just a plain threat?"

Clavering tapped a cigarette upon the case and seemed to pay no attention to her query.

"I have done all I said I would do," he continued easily and in a manner that did not indicate his feelings at all. "I have made it possible for you to enter Benin City and come away again with—him. I have shown you all that you have seen purposely, just to make you understand at this moment that you are both helplessly in my hands, to do with as I will. And, knowing that, I want you also to understand that you are under no compulsion to sacrifice yourself upon the altar of gratitude. I don't want your gratitude. I want—*you!*"

Miss Severoid was startled; more than that, she was afraid that Clavering was using weapons that were keener than compulsion would have been—weapons that made her feel rather small and mean and hypocritical.

"I—" She met the quiet look he gave her with a sudden effort, and the knifelike stabbing in her heart gave her renewed deliberation. "You mean you want me to stay in this dreadful country?" she asked with a soft plaintiveness that became her very well, and quite as if she would be willing to stay with him almost anywhere else.

Clavering lit his cigarette, picked up two camp-

chairs, and strolled with them to the window-hole, so that the smoke would not be likely to bother the invalid. His manner was most annoyingly indifferent.

"Let's sit over here and see the sights. They're most unclean; but that doesn't matter. Er—no—I don't wish to stay in this dreadful country. It's too—oh, well, it's everything that isn't very nice. Sit down, won't you?"

With another glance toward Ralph, Miss Severoid sat down.

She did not like Clavering's mood in the least. It was too matter-of-fact; so much so that even the view through the window did not disturb her at all. Yet it was a brutal picture—filthy and heathenish and nakedly vicious.

"Then where?" she began haltingly.

"Australia, South Africa, Canada—no, Canada's too cold. But there's lots of room in the world for us three, and he"—nodding toward Ralph again—"can't live in England comfortably. I think Sydney would be all right, or Johannesburg."

His hand darted out as a snake strikes and closed over Miss Severoid's with a sudden pressure that made her gasp with the pain of it.

"Which is it to be?"

His eyes bored into the back of her mind like gimlets and put a clamp upon her tongue, so that she could not lie or shuffle or even bring a smile to her assistance. There was something about him that fascinated even while it frightened her, and she simply looked at him in a dull, unhappy sort of way that plainly annoyed him.

"Why don't you answer? I'm not compelling you to do anything you do not wish to do. I am not issuing an ultimatum, though I think you expected one, didn't you?" He leaned a little nearer to her. "Something

really devilish, like keeping you in Benin City unless you promised to love, honor, and obey me? That's all nonsense. You'd die indecently in this rotten climate in less than no time, and I'd have just that much more on my conscience."

He smiled rather unpleasantly as if he knew quite well what she was thinking about his conscience. Miss Severoid, who was not at all accustomed to the sensation, sat quite still, hardly daring to breath, and feeling that he was taking an unfair advantage of her by being so astoundingly magnanimous about everything.

"I've said you can go back to England if you care to," he went on quietly, and though the pressure of his fingers relaxed a little, there was a glow in his eyes that might portend anything. "And I've protected you—taking care that there is nothing for which the government will be likely to hold you responsible when you go down-river. You have nothing to fear, and I sha'n't go with you if you don't wish me to. I'm simply giving up all this because I'm tired of it—tired of the power and the pleasure and the greasy, naked devilishness of it. You've shown me the way, that's all."

Miss Severoid laughed—a stupid, hysterical little sound that surprised herself more than it did Clavering.

She did not know why she had laughed. Everything was confused, and she felt very cold and hopelessly alone. Had she not laughed, she would have screamed.

"You—you're giving this all up!" Her voice was as dead as the look upon her face. She spoke just for the sake of saying something—with a misty vision of Clavering trailing her like Nemesis along Bond Street.

And Clavering seemed to guess exactly what she thought.

He threw his half-finished cigarette out of the window with a gesture of impatience, then leaning toward her suddenly, his voice changed a little and became thinner.

"I suppose if I were to tell you that you've won, not because you were clever, but because the motherliness that's in you awakened me to the fact that I have a soul, you'd laugh at me? Oh, yes! I have a soul! Pretty ragged, perhaps, yet a soul—and I love you, too. You don't believe that either, do you? You think I am hopelessly rotten at the core. But that's because you don't know what this country can do to a man.

"It feeds upon his mind and tunes his nerves to screeching point—makes *Simon Legrees* out of raw youngsters and hell-fiends out of grown men. And then they go home to paved streets and a white wife, and wonder how they ever did the things they think nothing of doing out here; ugly things that would sicken you just to hear of them. And a year in civilization—with you—would make me as respectable as a bank-clerk."

He laughed, but the sound had a squeaky, hysterical note in it.

"Why do you look at me like that? Think it rather funny that I should want to be decent?"

He released her hand as suddenly as he had seized it, and rising abruptly, stood over her like a threat, his eyes glowing out of their pale setting like smoldering coal.

She did not move or speak; could not. A numbing hopelessness held her as in a trance, staring up at him rather stupidly.

There was a certain desperation in his manner, too, that she could not understand. An ashen gray pallor was spreading slowly over his cheeks. When he turned abruptly and strode toward the door she did

not know that it was because every nerve and sinew in his passion-racked body was drawn tight as a violin string—that he knew that if he stood there, looking down into the wondering blue of her eyes and upon the tempting red of her parted lips, something would surely snap and he would not be responsible for what happened—afterward.

But Miss Severoid did not know that. She did not know that most of his *sang froid* was a pose; nor had she any knowledge of the form his relaxation took when the man—or the devil—beneath showed through the veneer with which she had become acquainted.

Her glance followed him in bewilderment. Things had all gone wrong. She had expected passion and threats, and perhaps a little boisterous love-making; an attitude she could meet and play with—for McClure's sake. Instead, there was an unapproachable calm—a simple offer of marriage and a simpler intimation that she do just as she pleased about it. He was going to give up his lawless life, anyway.

All of which tacitly intimated that McClure was to be left to the mercy of Daka and that there was no need to say any more upon that matter. The trader was out of it—ended—done for!

Her breath caught sharply. Glancing fearfully toward Ralph again, then out to where Plymouth sat among the Jackrie carriers, lazily smoking his pipe, she rose softly and tiptoed to Clavering's side, desperate and determined, yet with an expression of childlike simplicity upon her face that would have melted the heart of the Sphinx, if she had one.

But the tips of her fingers had barely touched Clavering's arm when he spun round sharply and with such a sudden flash of fire in his eyes that she drew quickly away from him with a little gasp of surprise and fear.

"Don't!" His voice was strangely thick and hoarse,

and there was a strange whine of pleading in it she had never heard before. "Go back! Great God, can't you see? Can't you—"

Yes, she could see now, and wondered why she had not seen that madness in his face before. His cheeks were the color of parchment, and, with his lips drawn back from his teeth, he closely and hideously resembled a grinning death's head.

She shrank from him involuntarily; and when he took two rapid strides toward her, her knees shook and her mouth opened as though she would scream.

But no sound came.

He stopped short as if the possibility of her screaming frightened him a little. Then he looked at her for a few moments—smiling—a terrible smile that made an icy chill race down her spine.

"You've kissed me, lied to me, and played with me!" The words came thickly through a gathering in his throat. "I've just been useful—a mere necessary puppet in your little game of life. And now that you've won, I'm simply a person with an ugly reputation, unfit to mingle with you in decent society.

"Why don't you speak?" His voice rose an octave or two. "Why don't you tell the truth? It's nothing new to me. I've seen it in your eyes from the beginning. Those eyes of yours have haunted me since the first time I saw them. They've looked through and through me—measured me for what I am—seen the blackness and hell inside of me—used me and laughed at me—called me a fool—sneered at me and loathed me when my back's been turned!

"My mother had eyes like those—angel's eyes in a she-wolf's head—and she—"

He stopped, and, his mouth twisting hideously, teeth gritting, his whole face became suddenly distorted in demoniacal fury.

"Damn them! I'll—"

His voice screeched and cracked, and his right arm rose with startling swiftness as if to strike the steady blue of Miss Severoid's eyes from his sight.

A harsh scream came from Ralph's corner.

Clavering's head jerked upward as though the sound had been an upper-cut, and his descending arm halted foolishly in mid air. His was the face of a man who has awakened from a ghastly dream, and the white heat of his passion went out like a snuffed candle.

Miss Severoid also heard her brother's cry, and it took the deadly numbness out of her limbs instantly. Staggering back a step or two, she faced about and through the blur before her eyes saw Ralph staring wildly at them, doing his best to raise himself from the pillows.

"Don't, boy! It—it's all right. It's—nothing—at all!"

She sank down beside him, murmuring soothing words and smiling through her tears and her terror; and when she had pacified him a little and dared look around again, Ilora was bringing in hot water and Clavering had gone.

Ilora did not look as if she was disappointed about anything.

But she was.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE WAGER

Curiously enough, previous to his Satanic outburst of passion, Miss Severoid had not been in the least afraid of Clavering in a physical sense. She had believed that her influence over him was strong enough to keep him within the bounds of decency.

But after that flash of fiendishness to which he had treated her, her attitude toward him underwent a change that was almost a revolution. Though she felt sure that his next mood would be an apologetic one, she doubted whether, by the simple persuasion of her eyes and lips and voice she could induce him to effect McClure's release from Benin City.

Which, apart from getting Ralph to sleep again, was her sole object in life just then.

Consequently, breakfast was a mockery; one moment dull and leaden in despair, the next quivering in anticipation of Clavering's return. The very thought of his coming back made her tremble; but the thought that he might not come back at all made her cold.

She needed him, yet was afraid to make him useful; feared him, yet shivered to think of what her plight would be without him.

She was thankful, however, for the mercy that Ralph went to sleep again without asking too many questions. He was too weak for that, and as the noise of the early morning hours died down very perceptibly, she was thankful for that, too. It was as if

the village, barbarous as it was, had realized that it had an invalid on its hands and was acting accordingly.

The boy moaned every now and then, and his sister watched over him, tight-lipped and dry of eye, with a pained but thoughtful expression upon her face as she desperately tried to think of something that might make McClure's release from Daka's clutches interesting to Clavering.

Which was a problem in psychology equal to the "Asses' Bridge."

Just a few minutes before Clavering came in again, she found something; a desperate chance that made her shiver to think of it.

Clavering's entrance was very quiet, his face passive and his manner not in the least apologetic. One would never have believed that he and the man of an hour before were the same. In fact, the difference was so great that a physician would probably have asked him the name of the opiate he used.

And Clavering could have told him, too.

Miss Severoid observed the change in him at once, and drew a deep and silent breath of relief that extended to the very soles of her shoes. But as his attitude seemed to consider the incident of his temporary madness closed, and that there was nothing more to be said about it, that did not suit her purpose in the least.

Ilora shuffled out the moment he came in, and Miss Severoid, who was kneeling by Ralph's side, looked up and asked casually.

"Apologies—I suppose?"

Clavering rubbed his perspiring hands on his handkerchief, coolly and carefully.

"No. I'm sorry if I frightened you—but not for anything I said. I have nothing to retract."

"I see. But the next time you want to display your

villainous temper, don't do it so loudly. Not that I am in the least afraid of you or of the noise you make. But you wakened the boy."

Clavering bit his nether lip. He felt as a fighter feels when, carefully guarding his face, he is hit in the stomach.

"Oh, I'm sorry. But these beasts outside are a little quieter, are they not? I tried to make them so."

"Thank you," rising slowly and facing him again. "I've noticed they were not screaming so much. What did you expect me to do the last time you were in here? Throw myself at your feet and sob all over your shoe-laces?"

She went nearer to him—smiling.

"Don't be stupid. And please don't swear at my eyes again. I don't like that very much. Besides, when you lose your temper like that, you become quite fiendish, and you don't look a bit pretty. The next time you feel that way have a mirror handy. That should cure you."

Clavering had no defense. At least he offered none. His expression was trying to be tolerant and indifferent, so Miss Severoid hurried on before it became too much so.

"Neither did I like the terribly respectable way you spoke about Sydney and Johannesburg. That was—oh! I don't know what to think about it. But it wasn't you. I expected you to treat me to something really desperate—to carry me off to Timbuctu or some such place and—and you want to be as respectable as a bank clerk!"

Her smile became a low, mirthful laugh that stung. Clavering winced and his eyes began to burn again.

"That is the sort of proposal I might expect from Mr. McClure," Miss Severoid went on tantalizingly. "Staid, orthodox, every-day love-making.

"But, by the way, what has become of Mr. McClure? I've been so worried about the boy—and your ideas of reform—that I haven't had a chance to ask. Ilora brought me his revolver and told me a silly story about him being left behind in Benin City. But you wouldn't allow that, would you?"

She was very near to Clavering then, looking half seriously, half jokingly up into his face; and he could not meet her eye-to-eye. The world without drifted farther and farther away.

"She brought you his revolver?" Clavering's voice was low and a little hoarse. "What did she say—when she brought it?"

Miss Severoid told him very simply what Ilora had said, and, taking hold of the third button of his coat in the naïve way she had, trifled with it absently as she spoke.

"She brought me the revolver because she thought I liked Mr. McClure. Wasn't that queer?"

And Clavering smiled in spite of himself. Ilora's cleverness in diverting suspicion from herself appealed to him.

But he did not know how altogether clever she had been; nor did he know that she was standing just outside the door, gathering a fair understanding of all that was said.

"Why are you smiling?" Miss Severoid asked quickly. "Because the girl thought I liked Mr. McClure? It may be queer that she should have thought so, but there isn't anything very funny in it, is there? I do like him, partly because he is one of the few men who isn't afraid of you. He laughs at you, in fact. He's said time and again that he'd shoot you on sight, and once, when I asked him if he wasn't afraid you'd shoot first, he laughed and told me it would be rather interesting to know whether you were quicker

at that sort of thing than he was. Do you think you are?"

Her lips were teasing him, even as her eyes and voice challenged, and the quick response that came into Clavering's face was surprising.

But in subtly creating the question Miss Severoid did not know of a previous contest that had taken place behind Marsden & Co.'s powder store; an incident Clavering was not likely to forget as long as he lived. And though he was quite sure that Daka would take ample revenge for him, the satisfaction would not be nearly so keen as if he squared accounts himself.

"He said that, did he?" Clavering's tone was thoughtful, and even as his hands came out and closed about Miss Severoid's arms, there was nothing boisterous in his action. His mind was following the trail of a new possibility.

"And what do you think?"

Miss Severoid pouted deliciously and made no attempt to gain release; not even though Ralph moaned again and threatened to awake.

"Um—well—I'm not sure," she said doubtfully. "But I told Mr. McClure that if the chance ever came for a test, you wouldn't be afraid of it. Was I right? Would you be afraid to—to go out into the bush there with him and stalk each other until—well—I've read of men doing that?"

Clavering searched her face as with a microscope, and there was an eagerness in his own that was difficult for Miss Severoid to understand. He did not speak, and the seconds were each a thousand silent years to his tempter, who was playing a very desperate chance for all it was worth.

"Wh—why don't you answer me?" she asked at last impatiently. "I—I—gracious! You—you *are* afraid!"

She drew out of the grip of his hands very slowly and though there wasn't a sign of fear in the outlaw's face, her eyes grew wide in astonishment.

"I—I—why! I thought a man like you would be a real gambler—a man who constantly took chances like that!"

Clavering's smile of derision wasn't very healthy, but he was not thinking of McClure at all. Only of what Daka would have to say—afterward; and he wanted to be sure that it would not matter to him what Daka said or thought or did.

"Why should I gamble again, when I've won?" he asked quietly.

"Won what?"

"The right to take you or let you go."

Miss Severoid's eyes flashed suddenly and she drew away a few paces more—laughing at him.

The sound was not a pleasant one. There was no mirth in it, and she seemed to be having difficulty in getting her breath.

"You—win! You—you didn't win anything. Daka and all those other beasts won it for you. You wouldn't meet McClure face to face and tell him what you have told me now. He—he'd kill you! And you know it, too. That was why you got those creatures of yours to—to—"

She shuddered, and the thought of what might have happened to McClure seemed to fill her throat.

"Wh—what have you done to him? Where is he? Do you think I could ever get any pleasure out of my brother's life if I thought McClure had been stabbed in the back—in the dark? And—and you come to me after—after a thing like that and say that you have a right to take me or let me go just—just because you've put him out of the way! You—you're a coward! Just a cowardly beast who—"

"Stop!"

The word was like a pistol shot, and Clavering was standing over her, not threateningly, but quietly; the quiet of a man who has reached a decision.

"That will do. And let's drop these subterfuges once and for all and understand each other.

"You're my woman—mine! And you've been mine since that first time I held you in my arms and you made me a present of my life. I told you then that the word good-by had no place between you and me, and it sha'n't have. Do you understand me?"

Miss Severoid was not at all sure. She felt very cold and her cheeks were chalky white; and she thought, for a moment or two, that she was going to sink to the floor at Clavering's feet. Then the dizziness passed, but when Ralph moaned restlessly she scarcely heard him. Tulami had ceased to exist.

"You—you don't deny that you betrayed McClure to Daka!" she gasped desperately. "And yet you expect me to—to go away with you as if—as if—"

Her hand went out as though to ward him off, and her voice trailed away to a hoarse, tense whisper.

"You—you're not a white man! You've lived among these—these animals so long that you—that you—oh! you must be *mad!*"

"No, hardly that—yet," Clavering returned easily, speaking in a strangely quiet voice that did not fit his attitude or the things he said. "I love you, that's all—and my answer is that you are hoping I will save McClure and bring him back to you!" He smiled—an effort that mocked her hopes and laid them bare. "And I hate your sandy-haired friend. When Cralla struck him across the eyes with his hippo-hide, I was glad, not because of his pain, but because he could not see *you!*" A pause. There was just the faintest hint of savagery in his smile now. "Once upon a time I

would have laughed at the man who could possibly think as much of any woman as to really enjoy a rival's blindness, and, before you came, I used to have an honest admiration for McClure. In cold blood I suppose I admire him even more now than I ever did, but I also hate him most damnably—simply because he stands between you and me—because I know that he will always stand there whether he lives or dies!"

Miss Severoid looked away from him in a bewilderment that made speech impossible for a little while. And her whole attitude changed. It had to. She was not acting now.

"And—and you betrayed him to Daka for that! Wouldn't give him even a fighting chance for his life because you—because you thought that I—that I—" she balked at the truth and went around it quickly—desperately. "Why don't you give him a chance? A white man's chance to fight you like a white man? Not that I like to think of sending two men at each other's throats like dogs, but it seems to be the only thing you can understand.

"Take him out of the hands of that scum—meet him face to face and tell him the things you have told me, and—and I—I'll go with you—*anywhere!*"

The last of it was only a breath, as if she were afraid he might hear the sudden offer she made and would accept it. But there was nothing in her eyes that told of the shrinking horror she felt at the very thought of being called upon to make the sacrifice. They met Clavering's so steadily that his glance shifted and strayed guiltily to where Ralph lay moaning and threatening at any moment to awake.

The outlaw's mouth tightened.

"And if I gave him that chance—met him face to face and killed him—you'd hate me more than you do now," he said in a wonderfully steady voice. "I'd

have to kill him, too—not because I hate him, but because he'd surely kill me if I didn't. And you know you'd never go with me because you wanted to. You'd hate me and you'd fight like a she-wolf every step we took. And you'd do for me at the finish. You know that, don't you?"

"Not if you gave him a fair chance," came the surprisingly clear and steady answer. "I'd rather stay here with an outlaw who was a white man, than go to Sydney or anywhere else with a treacherous beast who was half black."

The faintest tinge of color crept over Clavering's cheek-bones, as if she had found a spot that hurt. He looked out of the window hurriedly as though he feared some one might have overheard what she said and understood it.

"You'll give him that chance, won't you?" Miss Severoid pleaded, and her voice was much softer than it had been. "A fair chance to die, as you would want to die if you were in his place. He'd give *you* the chance if your positions were reversed. If you know the man at all, you know he would do that."

And Clavering winced. Again, quite unconsciously, she had found a sore spot, because the outlaw was never likely to forget the fair chance McClure had given him—behind Marsden & Co.'s powder store.

Then suddenly, with a gesture of impatience, he turned and, ere she could move, he had swept her into his arms, crushing her to him fiercely, proving to her how utterly powerless she was.

But she did not struggle. For a second or two she was frightened, and then she met his burning, black eyes in a manner that was just a little discomfiting—just as Maybrick had found it.

"Ever since I first saw you in the *Violet's* cabin," Clavering said in a low voice, "since you first looked

up at me and laughed and were not afraid, I knew that this sort of life must end. And it's ended. You speak of giving McClure a chance. Why not give me one? I am—"

"I'll give you a chance if you'll give *him* one," Miss Severoid interrupted quickly, and hoped Ralph was not awake. "I said I would, and I mean it. I—I'd try to—to love you, too, if you'd—if you'd show me that you can fight a white man's fight—fairly—and not like a Jackrie—in the dark."

The pressure of Clavering's arms relaxed a little, but his eyes were doing their best to search to the roots of her sincerity. The spot of color over his cheek bones came back again.

"And if I—killed him?"

And Miss Severoid's mind, in spite of that ugly threat, took a sudden and fantastic twist, so that she smiled teasingly up at him as though she were herself again. "I—I'll bet you—*myself*—that you don't!"

"You mean you'd—"

He stopped and his arms fell slowly to his sides. His expression was that of a man who has been attacked from an unexpected quarter. He seemed to consider in a queer, apologetic sort of way that Miss Severoid was taking an unfair advantage of him.

"You mean you'll wager with me, with *yourself* as the stake, that I can't—"

"Exactly."

That measured word gave no indication of the surging leap of hope Miss Severoid's heart took as she saw Clavering's face light up with a new and fervid enthusiasm; the eager light that comes into the eyes of the man to whom gambling is second nature.

"And I'd pay the bet, too."

"Done!"

The word, so high pitched that it squeaked, was fol-

lowed by a minute of deep, deep silence. In it they shook hands solemnly upon the wager and looked into each other's soul for the sign that they would both play fair.

And though Clavering learned more clearly in that eloquent pause why Miss Severoid had made the wager, he said nothing nor gave any sign that he knew.

Some time later Miss Severoid watched him make his way out of the village, followed by Cralla's head man, who carried a black, tarpaulin-covered carrier's pack; and also by Ilora. He apologized for having to take her with him.

Miss Severoid had no misgivings upon the question of fair play, nor any fear because she was being left alone under the guardianship of the greasy, decrepit chief of the village and of the squat and ugly Plymouth. Nor did she bother about where Cralla had gone, nor about her own future, nor the fact that she had not slept for forty-eight hours.

Instead, her throbbing heart was whispering exultantly:

"He has a chance!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

A THREAT AND A PROMISE

McClure came to himself with an insistent desire to kill. *Yaka* juice has that effect, if the dose is strong enough and an incentive is not wanting.

For fifteen minutes he tugged and strained at the hide thongs that bound him, his gray eyes screeching murder and his mouth contorting itself in a manner that was most unpleasant to see. Then he subsided, thoroughly exhausted, to lie gasping for breath amid a stench that sickened and threatened to suffocate him.

After a while he learned that he was quite alone upon the floor of a very filthy little round hut, and that a large, pockmarked Beni was choking the doorway to the exclusion of the air. The Beni was grinning at him and jabbering to himself. Then, having come to some sort of conclusion upon the matter, jabbered a little more and departed.

Judging by the light, McClure guessed the time to be about three in the afternoon. Savagely discordant sounds came to his ears; the shrill cries of children and the staccato yelling of older people who were indulging in mild conversation with all the vocal energy of street venders.

Whines and moans and laughter were strangely intermingled, but all that was only incidental to the nauseous odors that outraged the atmosphere.

In a few minutes, however, McClure's mind rose above these things and he began to think. This, of

course, made him strain and tug at the tough hide strips again, so that they cut into his flesh like knives. And equally, of course, his struggles were of no earthly avail.

Breathing heavily and deeply, he lay quite still for another space, staring at the dun brown ceiling and—thinking. Men have gone mad doing that, and they were not trussed like a smoked ham in the city of Benin either.

McClure knew exactly where he was and what was likely to happen to him. He needed no information on that score. Somehow it was not much consolation to feel that he could at least show "these beasts" how to die like a gentleman; partly because the Benis would not be impressed by the performance, and greatly because one can't look very dignified minus one's ears and eyes.

The trader still had those, but he was quite sure he would lose them—hours, perhaps days, before his body would give up the struggle to live.

He had no very definite ideas upon the question of Cralla's treachery, and did not bother with that angle of the matter, so far as he himself was concerned. But he did think of what might have happened to Miss Severoid—and again became temporarily insane till exhaustion and the lacerating thongs once more taught him the impotence of his furious efforts to be free.

Two deep blue eyes came to torture and then to soothe him. Feeling again the hasty brushing of her lips upon his thumb, he smiled in a manner that would have been sickly had the circumstances not made it magnificent.

The screeching riot of sound without lessened considerably, and as McClure was trying to guess what it might portend, a large, fat hulk of black humanity waddled into the doorway.

The trader knew at once that it was Daka. Instead of being disturbed by the greasy, rotund majesty of that chief of chiefs, he took the opportunity to have a good look at him and quickly saw that he had not been above copying the majority of Cralla's sartorial effects, while he had added others of his own—rings that blazed upon his fingers like headlights and glittering beads and red coral charms that hung about his neck with such prodigality that they might have been for sale.

His bulk filled the doorway so that McClure could see very little of what was going on behind him. In fact, after the first few moments he saw only the beady black eyes of the chief fastened upon him with all the banefulness of a snake hypnotizing its prey.

Daka did not speak; just looked long and gloatingly at the truly splendid bargain he had made.

McClure returned the scrutiny without a shade of fear. It was not bravado; merely an attempt to find out what manner of man Daka was beneath the rolling black layers of fat that told of a life spent in hog-idleness and gluttony.

And presently the chief's glance shifted.

He studied McClure's hippo-hide bonds nervously, as if he were afraid they might not be strong enough, and as the trader with a mighty heave raised himself into a sitting posture, Daka's coward heart jumped, his beefy jaw sagged, and with a hurried, backward scuffle he receded from the doorway, muttering squeakily in the Beni jargon and waddled hastily out of McClure's sight.

The trader grinned contemptuously, and as he lay down again his spirit groaned at the thought of dying at the hands of such a brute. But he knew perfectly well that making Daka's heart pound faster would not help matters any. This was instantly proven by the

return of his pockmarked guard, accompanied by no fewer than five wild and woolly and awful-smelling assistants, each of whom carried a machete.

They squatted about their prisoner, ready to do him violent injury if he moved so much as a finger. McClure, though he lay very still, considered each of them separately with a cold gray stare that plainly made them very uneasy.

Centuries passed; the air became a little cooler; darkness came.

And almost simultaneously—Cralla!

He came into the doorway very quietly, just as the pockmarked guard lit a small hurricane lamp, and his face was as passive as a plaster-of-paris cast. Ignoring McClure's impotent glare completely, he looked the guards over, grunted unintelligibly and went out again.

McClure did not know what to think, and he did not want to think at all; but thoughts came to him—suspicions and fears and conjectures that were like knife thrusts.

He believed, for one thing, that Miss Severoid was still in Benin City and that Clavering meant to keep her there!

And then his tortured mind was again diverted by the entrance of a mammy, carrying a chop-pot well-nigh filled with steaming palm-oil chop, which is the roast beef of the Delta and may contain, in addition to yams, red peppers and palm oil, almost anything the cook cares to put into it.

Instantly McClure's guards, with harsh grunts of approval, deserted him to squat about the chop-pot and gorge themselves in their own way—which isn't very pretty to watch. The mammy went out, and a moment or two later Ilora came into the doorway.

McClure's glance fell upon her and remained—wonderingly. But she paid not the slightest attention to

him; only to the guards so busily employed about the chop-pot.

Her presence there did not disturb them any more than Cralla's had done.

Was she not Cralla's wife? Was Cralla not Daka's friend? Had Cralla not delivered the white man into Daka's hands?

Of course!

Consequently Ilora had a perfect right to stand in the doorway and watch them eat.

In the dim light McClure could not see her face very clearly, but he saw that her right hand was concealed in the folds of her overcloth, and that, though she remained in the doorway till his guards had finished eating, her right hand did not stir.

Had he known that her fingers were curving about the butt of his own revolver he might have felt better —or worse. As it was, the only thing upon his mind was a large and heavy question mark.

Ilora had had no difficulty in recovering McClure's revolver. That had been the least of her troubles. Concealing it from Clavering's and then from Cralla's watchful eyes had been much more difficult than pilfering it from Miss Severoid's uniform case.

The girl's reason for taking it with her was simple. It was McClure's and she thought he might need it. She also hoped he would use it as she directed.

Presently the chop-pot was empty. The satiated Benis reformed their circle about McClure and sat watching him contentedly and with an expression upon their faces that hoped he was hungry because there was nothing left for him to eat.

Ilora went noiselessly out again.

Several more centuries passed and a deep silence fell upon all the world without. The city had dropped off

to sleep. Apparently there were to be no revels that night.

McClure's tongue and throat were hard and dry and painful; opalescent pinwheels began to revolve before his eyes, which were slightly bloodshot again and smarting as though on fire. The air he was forced to breathe was vilely heavy and the odors screeched to heaven.

They seemed to be affecting his guards, too. They became drowsy one by one—too drowsy to bother talking. But when Cralla's head man—big, brutal, and slant-eyed—came in with several bottles of raw Hamburg gin, none of the sleepy guards refused his share.

It was Daka's gin, and a gift from Daka was a gift from the gods. So they drank, and the head man drank, too. But *he* had not had *yaka* juice mixed with his palm-oil chop. When a machete blade snipped the neck off a fourth bottle he alone was left to drink it.

Which he didn't. He threw it into a corner, and, carefully looking over his unconscious victims who were sprawled about McClure like unto death, he rose from his haunches and, standing over the bewildered trader, announced thickly and with an ugly grin:

"Cralla come, li'l' bit. He make Daka drunk too much!"

McClure simply stared and tried to reorganize his thoughts. He was not given the opportunity, because Ilora came in again at that moment, and with a gruff intimation that Cralla was coming, instantly produced a long, lean knife, fell to her knees and began slashing at the trader's bonds with an avidity that was as remarkable as it was dangerous.

But she made no mistakes. Just as Cralla crouched into the doorway McClure staggered to his feet, half crazy with the pain of his cramped limbs, the delirious

sensation of freedom and the mystery and silence and devilish deliberateness of it all.

His semi-cynical, contemptuous attitude toward his fate altered in a moment to an insensate desire to be free—to know his enemies from his friends and to crush the former in his naked hands. And he looked as if he could crush quite a number of them that way just then.

He glared about him—at Cralla, at Ilora, at the head man and at the unconscious Benis at his feet. Then, emitting a throaty sound of pure animal joy, he stooped awkwardly, seized one of the guards' machetes and straightened again with the madness of fight in every aching nerve and sinew of his massive body.

"Sof'ly," Cralla warned hoarsely. "White mammy live for Tulami. We go dere. Sof'ly, sof'ly!"

McClure's glance pierced the shadows and searched Cralla's face for the hint of a lie, while he tried to rub some feeling into his legs. Then, listening a moment or two and hearing no sound that seemed suspicious, he switched his attention sharply to Ilora.

"He talk true?" His voice rasped, and even those three words hurt, seeming to tear his dry throat to shreds.

Ilora cowered from his bloodshot eyes whimperingly.

"Be—be so. He talk true. White mammy live for Tulami. We go dere."

McClure did not believe it. He knew it was a trick—some subtle trap of Clavering's—some queer twist of that arch-devil's mind intended to make a mockery of his hopes.

But he followed Cralla's lead without another word, thankful for the chance given him to throw his head and shoulders back and fight.

They went out into the compound with scarcely any

sound. It was then shortly after 2 A. M. and there was very little moon; just enough to allow McClure to pick his steps with fair surety, and to make the stark forms of sleeping natives distinct enough to distinguish them from mango sticks.

It was many minutes before the gnawing ache of the revived circulation of blood in his congested legs and arms ceased to monopolize his attention.

Looming shapes of scattering clusters of huts were all about them, and as they threaded their way through that miniature maze and across an open space into the midst of another group of long, squat huts, they truly walked into the shadow of death.

But Cralla quite evidently knew what he was about, and though McClure took the precaution to make the headman walk before him and had Ilora step along at his left side so that her shoulder, pressing against his elbow, acted as a guide at every twist and turn they made, it seemed as though his carefulness was somewhat unnecessary.

It was like a city of the dead; sweltering and torpid and smothered in deep, deep shadows and deeper silences that suffocated. A grimy, sinister place that, so far as McClure knew, began nowhere and rambled aimlessly into gloomy space—a city with a thousand threats in every corner of it and not a single square inch that was clean.

And then they were out of slavedom—though McClure did not know they had been in it—and were crossing an open space with something like a flagpole in the center of it.

But it wasn't a flagpole. It was a good, thick mango stick—like a wharf pile—and in the daytime its base looked like a butcher's block.

McClure had been scheduled to die there ultimately —head down.

It was there, as Cralla swerved away to the right of that place of barbarous tortures that Ilora huddled a little closer to McClure and breathed very softly.

"Cralla go kill you. You shoot him? I get gun."

McClure started slightly, thought a minute, then whispered.

"You get gun? Where?"

"You shoot him? I give you gun if you shoot him. He go kill you!"

McClure walked in silence for a space, trying to guess what was behind it all. Then he came to the conclusion that in any event being in possession of a revolver would not do any harm.

"All right. Li'l' bit I shoot. When we get outside. You get gun?"

And Ilora grinned in hideous satisfaction; actually quivered with the joy of knowing that she, herself, would not have to shoot Cralla through the head. McClure was going to do it for her!

So she pressed the revolver happily into his keeping, and his hand closed over it as a man grips the hand of his dearest friend. The feel of it told him that it was his own, but he smothered the impulsive question that sprang to his tongue and followed silently on.

Still swerving to the right and apparently unconscious of the conspiracy hatching behind him, Cralla led them toward huts that loomed larger and more importantly out of the murk. Then, curving around the outer fringe of them he crept cautiously up to something that suddenly rose out of the earth—humming.

The humming ceased.

With every nerve strung to snapping point, McClure heard a gasp, a grunt, and the sickening impact of a blackjack with a human skull.

Then silence.

Cralla went on again, breathing a little deeper, and McClure stepped carefully, following the headman's lead so that he would not tread upon the fallen Beni watch-boy; possibly an innovation of Clavering's own.

But that was only one.

Winding in and out of an impenetrable maze of by-ways that could not have been dignified even with the name of alleys, Cralla led a tortuous route in a catlike manner; so accurately and with such a fine sense of what was dangerous and what was not that even to McClure, who was not unused to native villages, it seemed almost supernatural.

The chief appeared to sense the presence of a watch-boy minutes before they came to one, and he did not seem to make any special effort to avoid them.

McClure had counted three boys when the clusters of huts began to thin out toward the city wall.

And then there was a fourth watch-boy—the boy with the bush-dog for a pet.

The boy was of no account.

But the bush-dog—

CHAPTER XXXIV

CRALLA?

Geese saved Rome; field mice gnawed the bow-strings of the Assyrians in Sennacherib's time, and Rameses is pictured using lions in his battle line.

But this is a short, sharp chapter in the life of a mangy, yellow bush-dog that was considered to be of no earthly use to any one.

His master, the watch-boy, sank under Cralla's uncanny attack as the other three had done—with a choking grunt that died into a long-drawn-out sigh. But the bush-dog, wheeling away from him and the chief, yelped with all its lungs and went on yelping its grief and terror and rage to heaven till other bush-dogs near and far sympathetically took up the strain.

Cralla swore; not a Jackrie oath, but a solid English "Damn!" that startled McClure almost as much as the bush-dog's yelping.

But there was no time to be startled.

Cralla knew that, and plucking up his trailing cloth, he promptly took to his heels, hoarsely calling in Jackrie for the others to follow.

They followed.

Behind them Hades was let loose ere they had gone fifty yards. Before them was a sort of Purgatory.

Black things with shapes of men rose out of the ground, yawned affrightedly and started to their feet wondering what on earth was the matter. And that indecision and the Beni's natural disinclination to fight

anything until he is sure there is enough of him to make the attack, undoubtedly helped the fugitives considerably.

Frightened questions, screams of fear and the wailing cries of suddenly awakened children were quickly mingled in an inextricable chaos that made the Benis still more uncertain; but the moon, with an eye to scenic effect, came out from behind a darkening cloud and shed an anemic ray upon that pandemonium.

Cralla's stride lengthened and the others came swiftly at his heels, Ilora holding close to McClure's side, gripping a long, lean knife in her right hand—the knife with which she had cut the trader's bonds.

There were Benis everywhere. They poured out of their huts in swarms like bees, and presently the belching roar of a muzzle-loader was followed by the sharp crack of a rifle—one of Clavering's gifts. A bullet hummed past McClure's ear and told him that one Beni at least evidently saw clearly enough to know what was wrong.

He did not know where Cralla was leading. There were huts all about him and darksome alleys that led Heaven knew where; but he did know that the opportunity to fight was being largely presented to him. And when Cralla and his head man dived into a sort of lane that led through a black cluster of huts into the heart of a mob of greasy, smelly beings, he cracked heads upon right and left with the lusty discrimination of a man possessed of several devils.

Ilora was keeping close within the shadow of his bulk, using the long, lean knife with deadly effect, but even then her queer, savage mind was hoping that McClure would not use all the bullets in his revolver, because in that case there would be none left for Cralla.

McClure, strangely enough, was dimly thinking

along the same lines; but the bullet he hoped to keep was not for Cralla. He was determined not to go back to the slave-huts alive.

Something sharp and stinging tore through the sleeve of his shirt and made a little furrow on the fleshy part of his arm; another bullet singed the top of his head and yet another chipped the edge of his machete blade and almost knocked it out of his hand. But he took no count of these things.

He saw Benis all about him, and each was a threat though most of them were fighting aimlessly because they did not know any better, and the rest were whining and crouching away from the terrible sweep of his right arm as from a demigod.

Shrieks and yells and the wheezy, hissing breath of fight; the roar and rattle of heterogeneous firearms; the ugly *snick, snick* of machete-blades; the wailing of women; the pad and the scuffling of many feet; grunts and groans and the guttural Beni oaths were the sounds that came out of that place of riot and destruction.

Then, above it all, McClure became conscious of the unmistakable *spit, spit* of an automatic, and wondering whence it came suddenly saw Cralla straight ahead, mowing a path for himself, wielding a machete he had picked up somewhere like a cavalryman's saber, while flashes of fire spurted intermittently from his left hand.

McClure was thunderstruck. In a dim sort of way, while he hacked and slashed and brought himself and Ilora up to the dead man's heels, he realized that Cralla was fighting, not as his Jackrie head man was fighting, wildly with tooth and nail, but with the deliberation and poise of one who had been through many such encounters.

In fact, McClure was so astonished it almost cost

him his life. In that moment of hesitation, when the moon showed him the chief of Akerri, broad, erect, and magnificent, moving straight and swift and sure through the mob of thoroughly scared and bewildered Benis, a large and very wideawake brute sprang at the trader and lunged savagely at him with the broad-bladed wrist-knife of the upper Niger.

But the blow only gashed McClure's side a little; and the black hulk hurtling sidewise, grunted like a stuck pig, and dropped quietly at the trader's feet as Ilora, sinuous and terrible, slid from under his drooping weight, drawing a long, lean knife out of his vitals.

The girl grinned through the blood on her face, and McClure, instantly conscious of what she had done for him, seized her into the shelter of his left arm, and went altogether mad.

He swept through that greasy, sweating pack like a cyclone; a giant with bloodshot eyes, whose breath was as the hiss of a snake, and whose right arm whirled and cut with the devastating sweep of a scythe in a cornfield.

Benis huddled away from him whimpering. They called him a devil, and respected him as such, and those who lived to tell of it spoke of him as a *juju.*

He forced the headman to Cralla's shoulder and drove even Cralla ahead with the battering-ram force of the madness that was upon him. And then he was at Cralla's side, and they went through the last fragment of that evil-smelling crew together; through it as a knife cuts cheese, while a hail of bullets and other miscellaneous missiles whined about their heads and plowed into the slimy filth at their feet.

Some of the Benis followed them as they sprinted for the narrow gate of the city, but most of them didn't. The few who knew what it was about had

had enough, and the rest were screeching questions and waiting, shivering, for coherent answers.

Cralla knew that, and he also knew that when these answers were forthcoming there wasn't a corner in the Beni country north of Mayona that would be safe for him and his companions. Chief Tomi would harbor them even in defiance of Daka—if Clavering said so. Tulami's old chief wouldn't, because his village was too small and too near Benin City.

To reach Mayona before Daka's blood-crazy hordes overtook them—that was the situation Cralla faced.

There were two ways to meet it. To fend for himself, which gave him an excellent chance of life, or—

Cralla was thinking of the other way as they neared the city wall, and even as his automatic spat—once, twice, thrice—and two of the half-dozen guardians at the gate dropped in their tracks as they fled, the chief smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

McClure had not even seen the Benis at the gate. As he ran, Ilora clinging to his belt and the riot of sound behind them lending wings to their feet, his amazement regarding Cralla's methods and marksmanship increased a thousandfold.

They swept triumphantly through the unguarded gate to a greater measure of freedom.

They were each more or less blood-spattered and bore many little marks of conflict—cuts that were deeper than scratches and little furrows the Beni bullets and pot-legs had made. The most serious of their wounds was the half of an ear the headman had lost; and that was serious because it might be mistaken for a mark of slavery.

But Cralla had no time to bother about that. Plunging through the darkness, he kept on and on, till McClure lost all knowledge of distance, and till the

roarings and the screaming of the outraged Benis grew fainter and fainter, fading into a dull hum that died away altogether.

Apparently there was no pursuit then.

Ilora suddenly tugged at McClure's sleeve and whispered harshly.

"Why you no shoot? You be fool! He go kill you!"

McClure was startled. He had been thinking as he ran of the marvel of Cralla's fighting methods and had forgotten all about Ilora's warning that the chief had designs upon his life, and of his own promise to her. Before he had a chance to frame an excuse Cralla halted before an almost invisible path and wheeled upon the trader and the girl so suddenly that the former thought that Ilora's warning had not been idle.

McClure's revolver rose sharply, but in an instant he saw that the chief's hands were empty. Peering into his face he had a sudden and sharp suspicion that was staggering.

Ilora cowered out of sight behind him. She, too, thought that her whisper had been loud enough for Cralla to hear, even though she knew that the chief had not stopped for that alone, but because the path led to a small *juju* worshiping-hut where a black, tarpaulin-covered pack lay concealed.

Cralla looked interrogatively at McClure's revolver, and the trader lowered it slowly, feeling rather foolish.

"Ilora—*wah!*"

The girl whined, hesitated, then slunk from the protection of McClure's great body, fumbling with the haft of her knife, the blade of which was concealed in the folds of her cloth.

"Did you give him—that revolver?" Cralla asked in the Jackrie tongue.

No answer.

"Where did you get it?"

Still no answer. Ilora's sinuous body twisted awkwardly, and the whites of her eyes showed. Quite evidently she was waiting for McClure to keep his promise.

The quiet was painful, and McClure, who understood Jackrie well enough to know what was said, also felt he would like to know where Ilora had found his revolver. The headman simply stood by nursing his ear and muttering unhappily to himself.

"Where did you get it?" Cralla asked again in Jackrie and took a sudden step forward.

Ilora screamed and straightened. With a whine of savage rage and hopelessness she sprang like a puma at Cralla, one long, glittering claw glinting in the moonlight as her arm swept up, then down into space.

There was an ugly Jackrie oath, a short, sharp struggle, and the knife tinkled from Ilora's hand to the path at Cralla's feet. He put his naked foot upon it, and still gripping Ilora's wrists, while she writhed and fought savagely to be free, he began to pronounce the anathema which no Jackrie can hear and live with any degree of comfort ever afterward.

McClure shut his ears to it and the headman shivered and turned away.

Ilora's struggles ceased. She whined and wilted and slipped out of Cralla's grasp to shiver and moan and clutch him about the ankles in a terror that was not of the flesh.

And the ranting, dirgelike strain halted.

Kicking himself free of Ilora's fawning arms and stooping to secure the knife, Cralla's manner changed in a moment. He became suddenly very quiet and seemed to be listening.

And then—

"Already! Lord, that's quick!"

It was in perfect English. Before McClure could decide whether or not he had heard aright, Cralla went on, speaking very fast:

"This is my station, Mac. I get off here, but you and Dobo and the girl, if she wants to, must go on to Tulami—and go like the devil, too. And don't stop there a minute. Get to Mayona and have Tomi put you up. You'll be safe there. Say I sent you, and tell Miss Severoid that I took her advice on the question of color, but I'm sorry the wager's off.

"Now, skip. Those devils are coming, and coming fast—and there's a lot of them. Good-by, Mac. I've hated you, and I hate you now more than ever I did because you are going—to her. Still, you are a wonderful fighter, and killing you would have been a pleasure and an honor.

"But she needs you, and you must go to her. So hurry along like a good chap. You haven't a minute to lose, though I'll try to hold them as long as I can."

The voice was soft and easy, without a single tremor in it; the voice of a man to whom death is an everyday threat and of no consequence whatever. As the tawny hand came out, McClure, but dimly comprehending what "Cralla" meant to do, seized it in a grip that made the "chief" wince.

"You—you—are—" he sputtered hopelessly.

"That's it. Splendid guess. But she's waiting for you, man, and you must get her to Mayona. Must! Understand? And those beasts will be at Tulami before breakfast."

"Bu—but—great Heavens! You can't—you're not going to—"

"No, no, not at all. That's all right. But she needs us both just now, and your job is to get her to Mayona. Be good to her, and keep an eye on that

brother of hers. He's got a devil in him. Now *go*, you damned fool! You're wasting time. Dobo will show you the way and beat up the carriers for you. Good-by."

And in a moment, with a harsh order to Dobo, he had dived into the bush and was gone!

McClure's mind was in a maze.

That brother of hers! Wager! Cralla! Clavering! Benis at Tulami before breakfast!

The last was the only thing he properly understood, and it put life into his limbs very suddenly, so that when the headman started off into the gloom, McClure turned heavily to follow, because it was the only thing to do.

He hardly noticed Ilora, who crouched almost at his feet, until he nearly tripped over her. Then he stopped, stooped, and offered to assist her to rise.

"Come. We go. Bad man come," he said gently, touching her shoulder and hoping the headman would not get away too far.

But Ilora, pumalike to the last, snarled and turned like a flash upon the hand that had failed her, and her teeth, snapping upon his little finger, sank into it—to the bone!

McClure's bellow of surprise and pain echoed and reëchoed weirdly through the darkness. Ere the sound of it had died away the girl leaped to her feet, spat his own blood at him in contempt, and fled—to join her chief!

But Cralla had gone to make himself ready to die in the habiliment of a white man and a gentleman.

CHAPTER XXXV

"LIKE A GENTLEMAN—UNAFRAID"

A BIG, sandy-haired man, spattered with blood like a butcher's killer, staggered into Tulami with the dawn, following a Jackrie who was minus half an ear.

And they found the place full of Yorubas. There were three companies under the command of Lieutenant Maybrick and his juniors, Dale and Forrester.

When McClure saw them he thought it was a hallucination; a horrible trick his tortured mind was playing him.

But the Yorubas were very real and very desperate. The rain-storm that had at first held Miss Severoid in Tulami on tenter-hooks for twenty-four hours, together with the hours occupied in securing McClure's release, had just been hours enough to enable the Saloko contingent Maybrick had sent for to join him at Basanna.

It had marched to Mayona in time to rescue two half-dead Yoruba orderlies from an ugly fate in such a decided manner that Chief Tomi had instantly stopped bubbling over with good humor, and was not in the least likely to do so again. He was dead.

Then Maybrick had followed the trail of the fugitives to Tulami through the night, and had arrived barely an hour before, much to the relief and consternation of Miss Severoid, who did not know what to say or do or think for several minutes.

Then she had led Maybrick into the hut where her brother lay sleeping, and told the lieutenant where

Ralph had been and how she had got him back; that McClure had been left behind in Benin City, and that Clavering—who had not been at all unpleasant to her at Mayona—had gone to get the trader out. All of which made the lieutenant look stupid, more particularly when he looked at Ralph and then at Ralph's sister.

Then, still feeling somewhat guilty about the Mayona affair, he had violently shaken her hand, and said he was jolly glad and hoped everything would be all right. He went out to tell Forrester and Dale of how badly everybody had been fooled—not including himself, of course; how Cralla, of Akerri, had taken young Debenham out of Benin City, and of how Clavering had rescued the expedition from him, Maybrick, at Mayona, and was now gone to save McClure from a horrible fate in Benin City.

Maybrick had no idea that Miss Severoid had had a share in the Mayona "rescue."

Forrester said it was like a bally play, and Dale remarked that Miss Severoid was a deuced plucky little woman, and hoped old Talbot—who was the D. C. at Saloko, and not at all old—wouldn't be an ass and raise a dust about it.

"But he won't," Maybrick said sotto voce. "Not when he sees *her*. Don't suppose it's any use hoping that Clavering will walk right into our arms?"

McClure was the answer.

The big man asked no questions. He stopped, stared hard at Maybrick particularly, and got his breath again. When a little golden-haired, blue-eyed woman rushed, sobbing and laughing hysterically to meet him, he patted her on the shoulder and babbled about things she did not understand. Then, casting his bloodshot eyes over the Yorubas, he screeched at their officers in a voice that whistled.

"They're coming! Daka's crowd—blood mad! Cla—Cralla's back there—trying to stop them. I'm going back to—" He stopped, wheeled, and grabbed Dobo, the headman, by the shoulder. "Here, you! You're in this! Show me the way and get a move on, damn you! *Edge!*"

The final word was a shriek, and McClure was not quite sane when he suddenly turned and bolted through the Yoruba lines again, dragging the headman with him toward the bush-path leading to Benin City. Yet he was sane enough to want to reach Clavering before the Yorubas did, and, if the outlaw were alive, to give him the chance of escape that he, McClure, felt was his due.

That the trader had been betrayed into Daka's hands by Clavering, and for some unexplainable reason had been rescued again, had nothing to do with the matter. Such was the character of McClure's love for the woman whose scream followed him into the green bank of the bush.

He knew that Clavering was "back there somewhere" fighting—for her; which made the outlaw McClure's brother at once and without a single question. Afterward they might—and probably would—settle matters between themselves, but not then.

He heard the soft thunder of the Yorubas' naked feet behind him before he had gone half a mile, and they crept nearer and nearer at every step, because McClure was too big a man to do the running he had done that night and still be in any sort of condition to compete with a Yoruba.

Dobo, the headman, helped him a little, principally because he did not like the feel of McClure's revolver pressing into his spine, and, running ahead of the touch of it, acted as a sort of pacemaker; so that he was the first to come into conflict with Daka's revenge-

ful mob—south of the little path leading to the little *juju* worshiping-hut.

McClure thought that he heard the spit of an automatic, and instantly showed the Yorubas and their officers behind him what a man can do sometimes and live.

Some of the Benis were visible on the path. The rest were in the bush.

But McClure did not bother about those he could not see. He went straight ahead with the spit of an automatic revolver calling him on and on and into an exhibition of the sort of madness a man may be capable of only once in a lifetime, because he usually dies in the midst of it.

Bullets and pot-legs and other ammunition rained around McClure's head and spurted about his feet. The hum and the whine and the chug of them were constantly in his ears. They rent his clothing and singed his hair, and made little furrows in his legs and arms and over his ribs, and one actually cut his right shoe-lace in passing.

But, broad and deep as his chest was—and his head was big enough, too—the Benis could not find them.

He plunged into their midst, took the rifle out of the hands of one big brute, and clubbed him over the head with it; chanced to glimpse another taking a pot shot at him, and in a cold and terribly deliberate fashion fired at the Beni's trigger-finger—and laughed horribly when the woolly one howled, dropped his gun, and fled.

McClure wasn't thinking. He was just going—guided partly by Dobo, but greatly by the spiteful crack of an automatic.

And when he reached the little path leading to the *juju* worshiping-hut the Benis were in full flight, and the Yorubas were chasing them back into their "infer-

nal city," and were giving them reason to believe it would be best to stay there for a while—at least till the terrible little brown men had gone.

McClure could have found the path he sought without guidance. The dead were thickest there, and the mouth of the path was choked so that McClure and the headman had to clear it a little and go to Clavering's side, stepping very carefully.

And twenty yards within the path, with the spit of an automatic still in his ears, McClure found Clavering—dead in the midst of dead.

Ilora was stretched on her face at his feet.

Benis were strewn before and behind them in thick and ghastly profusion, and Clavering's automatic was still in his hand. But it was empty, and had been for more than an hour.

There was no trace of Cralla's personality in his face, which by some kindly whim of fate was scarcely marked. The tawny skin, the puffy cheeks and lips, the flabby throat, the trailing cloth, and the gray hair were gone. The chief of Akerri had given way to a lean-faced white man in white flannels, with a deep-red cummerbund about his waist.

There was an ugly hole where the pocket of his silk tennis-shirt had been.

Ilora's position in death was emblematic of what it had been in life. She always had been—figuratively and sometimes literally—upon her face at his feet. A deep and lasting respect, born of fear and superstition, had kept her there and had drawn her there at the end to fawn upon him and fight for him and plead forgiveness for her sins.

McClure was stupefied at first, and he had a dull sort of regret that Clavering and he could not "have it out," after all. Then, the madness of fight dying out of his blood, he felt chilly and choky and utterly

unable to think coherently for several minutes; just stood looking solemnly down into the outlaw's face and subconsciously bowed his head in silent tribute to the thing that Clavering had done—for the little blue-eyed woman at Tulami.

Dobo whined and wrung his hands. His knees shook and sagged, and just as he was ready to give way to the customary Jackrie wail over their dead—while the threat to bolt showed clearly in his face—McClure took a firm grip of his arm and growled harshly.

"Keep that till you get back to Akerri! He died white—white! You understand?"

Dobo wasn't sure, but the threatened wail was stilled. Presently, when McClure's mind had adjusted itself a little and thoughts came to him more clearly, he began to question Dobo, who very reluctantly—even at the revolver point—led him to the *juju* worshiping-hut. There they came upon a black, tarpaulin-covered carrier's pack.

It was not closed; in fact, it was in a state of riotous disorder, as if there had been no time to put things in their proper places.

But all that was left of Cralla was in it; the whole paraphernalia that had gone to make up that astounding personality.

A gray wig that was a masterpiece of the wigmaker's art; a flowing piece of "real India"; some little black, flat-sided beads made out of a sticky, gelatinlike substance that bore remarkable resemblance to the putty-like marks that decorated Cralla's forehead and cheeks; bottles, large and small, containing differently shaded dyes; grease paints and spirit gum; tawny-colored pastes of delicately differing shades; little camel's-hair brushes with the dye stain upon them; crinkly false hair of a grayish shade that had helped the illu-

sion of the wig; a small, three-paneled shaving mirror —a veritable dressing-room in miniature, with separate compartment for clothes—that had enabled Clavering to produce effects that had altered not only the color of his skin, but also every line of his countenance with the facility and ingenuity of a protean artist.

And Clavering had quite evidently been no mere bungler who had taken the part of Cralla in an amateurish spirit of adventure. He had been an artist of the first order, who had practised his art to the most minute detail; who had omitted nothing, and who had not only made himself look like a middle-aged Jackrie chief, but had actually *been* Cralla, chief of Akerri, to the life—impressive, fawning, crafty, vicious, and brutal—a Jackrie chieftain to his fingertips.

How he had produced the effect of the puffy lips and cheeks and the sign of Jackrie middle age that had hung about Cralla's flabby throat—and all the little effects—the thick and mottled skin and the lines and creases that had left only Clavering's eyes and a fairly straight nose—is a secret that died with him.

Dobo could not tell, and McClure questioned him upon everything that chanced to come into his head just then.

But the dual personality explained many things that had hitherto been very mysterious—of which Clavering's escape through the Yoruba lines at Saganna is a good example.

Chief Rama, who had been the victim of that fiasco, had threatened to become too independent and, consequently, dangerous. And Cralla had betrayed him to the government and had had him wiped out in a manner that for sheer subtle devilishness would be hard to equal. The "box seat" Clavering had re-

ferred to in his "special from the front" also becomes understandable, and the "war correspondent" had written his report in the little cabin of the government supply-launch that had borne him safely from the scene of the fight. McClure did not know the details of that incident then, but he knew of others; some that have happened in this story and some that have not, and, remembering that evening at Basanna when Cralla had crossed foils with Maybrick, McClure shook his head hopelessly and felt numb with the mystery and the queer magnificence of what Clavering's life and death had been.

Dobo, the headman, very unwillingly explained that Ilora and he and one or two very influential chiefs had known that Clavering and Cralla were the same, and, though a few of the smaller fry may have suspected it, the effect their knowledge had upon their attitude toward Clavering was to regard him as being still more of a *juju* than ever.

Any white man who could go into a hut and in half an hour come out of it a Jackrie chief was undoubtedly a supernatural being.

Also, according to Dobo, Cralla had originally come from a "far country"—which is the Jackrie equivalent for anywhere outside Jackriedom—and, settling in Akerri, had quickly insinuated himself into the position of chief. Some of the most important Jackrie chiefs had resented the intrusion, but they had speedily been brought to terms, and Cralla—or Clavering—had not looked back from that moment.

There was nothing in the pack to indicate who Clavering had been or whence he had come. McClure learned nothing of his beginnings whatsoever. No one ever did. He died as he had lived, queerly and uncannily, estranged from his color and his kin.

Of the man himself, he was an enigma; but it is

reasonably certain that in Cralla he portrayed the creature that had lurked under Clavering's skin; that wild, murderous animal that had found its level among those to whose habits and customs Clavering had descended.

Clavering, the spectacular gambler with fate—the man with the ragged edges of a soul who had tried vainly to lift himself once more to the level of the blue-eyed, motherly little woman who had flirted her way into his heart—that man unmistakably had had the beginnings of a gentleman.

But Cralla—well, he was a Jackrie, and he was unquestionably the stronger personality of the two. Many times had Cralla shown through the individuality of Clavering, but not once until the great test came did the white man show above Cralla's tawny skin.

The solitary and ugly reference he had made to his mother might have explained much had he been a little more generous with the details.

Maybrick and his fellow lieutenants when they returned from "the chase" were all very much startled to learn that Cralla and Clavering were one and the same. In fact, startled is not the word. Petrified is better.

And when they looked into the carrier's pack and heard McClure's story and understood it, their first feeling of satisfaction that the notorious outlaw was dead gave way to a quite different sort of sensation that made them look down upon Clavering's clay with a new and silent respect.

Lieutenant Dale was the first to speak.

"Let's—that is—let's bury them decently," he managed to say, and it was as if Solomon had spoken because their minds—Maybrick's particularly—were trying to believe that the Cralla they had known and greeted time and again was the man who had turned

Nigeria upside down and had died that a little white woman might live.

And while several Yorubas were busy with machetes, scooping out two long, narrow holes in the soft ground just outside the *juju* worshiping hut, Lieutenant Dale fashioned a rude cross out of mango-sticks. When the graves had been dug and were filled he stepped forward rather guiltily and stuck it into the ground at Clavering's head.

There was something crudely cut upon each side of the crosspiece—letters that stood out white and strong against the tawny-colored mango-bark. The others went forward to read what Dale had done with his pocket-knife.

CLAVERING—CRALLA

Just that and nothing more.

"Wonder which will last longer?" Dale questioned simply, suggesting that he had a mind that could stray a considerable distance from bullets and battle when the occasion demanded it.

No one answered. When McClure stuck a sprig of evergreen at Ilora's head no one questioned why.

Maybrick, who was stroking his chin reflectively, said quite suddenly and harshly, as if he had a grievance against everybody in general:

"Oh, rats! I'm going to do it, anyway!"

And in less than a minute he had a squad of Yorubas drawn up beside those two rising heaps, and three sharp but very solemn volleys were fired across them in respect for a thing that had been done—not with the blare of trumpets or in the passion or the madness of a moment, but with the quiet, deliberate calm of "a gentleman—unafraid."

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE HEADSTONE

Of the return to Tulami it is only necessary to state that it was quiet—very quiet.

The officers agreed to allow McClure to tell Miss Severoid the story. McClure said little.

Even under these circumstances he was having considerable difficulty in treating Maybrick civilly. McClure had an uncomfortably long memory.

Looking more like a butcher's killer than ever, he washed off the traces of the night's and morning's conflict and patched himself in a dozen little places ere he met Miss Severoid in the latter's hut.

They looked at each other for minutes before either spoke, and understood each other perfectly—without a word.

Ralph was conveniently asleep. With strife and death all about him, he had done little else than sleep since he had recovered consciousness, and the good effects were noticeable.

"He—he's—my—brother," Miss Severoid hazarded at last, and hoped none of the officers would come in.

McClure did not move an eyelash.

"I see. How is he? A little better?"

Miss Severoid gulped. McClure's heavy sort of patience and resignation were difficult to understand sometimes.

"Y-yes—thanks—lots. I—I meant to tell you,

but—" She went a little nearer. "Gracious! How your clothes are torn! And your hand is hurt! Let me—"

"That's all right," McClure interrupted, and covered the crude bandage that was wound about the incision Ilora's teeth had made. "We are moving south in an hour with Dale's company. Everything's all over, and in less than a week you'll be on board ship. How's that?"

Miss Severoid did not seem to like it very much.

"I—did—did he tell you anything about—a wager?"

"Nothing in detail. Said I was to tell you it was all off, and that he was sorry about it. And he said something, too, about taking your advice on the question of color. But that was all."

"Why! Where did you—where is he? He couldn't come here, of course!"

"Er—no—he couldn't come here."

"And—and he said the wager was off? Why? Because the Yorubas were here?"

McClure's eyes dulled. It was harder than he had had any idea it would be.

"No—that is—he—er—he didn't know the Yorubas were here, and he waited behind to keep those Benin City beasts back. They fought with us, you know, and we left them behind. But he knew they'd be on again worse than ever, and—well—he waited to keep them back as long as he could to—er—to give you a chance to get away. And—he—died."

His voice had fallen away to a subdued monotone that was funereally deep. Miss Severoid stood very still, looking up at him wonderingly—the innocent wonder of a child who has been told that the stars are millions and millions of miles away.

Then she seemed to understand a trifle better, and the little color that was in her cheeks receded slowly.

Her fingers fumbled with the tattered sleeve of McClure's coat.

"Dead!" she breathed. "He—he's dead!"

McClure nodded.

"And Cralla? You said before you ran off again that he—"

"He—he's dead, too."

"They—they died—together?"

"Together. And were buried together."

"You—you buried a white man with a *Jackrie!*"

"We buried a white man who was sometimes a *Jackrie,* but who died as white as the whitest man who ever lived."

"You—you mean—"

"That Clavering and Cralla were one and the same."

Miss Severoid's lips parted suddenly and McClure thought she was going to scream. Pain and surprise and not a little horror fought together in her face, and the scream seemed to become more imminent. But she did not scream nor utter a single word. Her mind, with a wonderful effort, rose above all forms of hysteria except tears, and those sprang into her eyes at once and flowed very, very quietly as McClure led her gently to a camp-chair and stood silently at her side as if to shade her pain from all the world.

She had a suffocating sensation of wanting to put the gripping tightness about her heart into words—when there were no words for it.

And then, when the tears had eased the weight a little and the first sharp pain of the shock had diminished, she found enough voice to ask questions, which McClure answered as best he could; so that the mention of Clavering's name made her throat and eyes fill very readily forever afterward.

That Clavering had been Cralla was a distortion to which her mind could not adjust itself for days, even

though she immediately recalled how she had repeatedly distrusted Cralla's eyes and mouth, and remembered how Clavering's demoniacal outburst of the previous morning resembled Cralla's inhuman rage when he had struck McClure across the eyes with the hippo-hide thong.

But even remembering these things, it was still an inconceivable, fantastic, irreconcilable combination, principally because she could not associate the sycophantic Jackrie chief with the thing that Clavering had done—for her.

And that was the memory of him she hugged in her breast—the only one—triumphant above all other things; a memory that, when it ceased to stifle, wrapped her heart about with a soft, exhilarating warmth as, her mission ended and her appalling task so wonderfully accomplished, she turned her face toward the south and left Tulami behind with the harsh sound of Yoruba huzzas in her ears.

Heavy, large and patient as usual, McClure asked no questions about the wager nor about any of the several little matters that were doubtful to him. It was not until they reached Saloko and had astounded the West African world with the news they had brought that there was any sort of an opportunity for an eye-to-eye conference about things.

It took place on Marsden & Co.'s launch *Rover* as it sped Segwanga-ward, with Saloko's good wishes dying out in the distance.

Ralph was in the cabin looking much better, his rapid recovery being due more to mind than medicine, but principally to "Bess," who, as some one in Saloko remarked with a fair amount of truth, "would make anybody get well."

The boy was still weak, but there was a grip of life in his face; his shoulder was healing properly and

rapidly and his hair was growing—which latter problem had disturbed his sister not a little.

She had just left him, having heard him say once more that he was a "rotter" and was sorry for everything he had ever done; and with a tender smile upon her lips she joined McClure on deck.

"Ralph's just told me again he's sorry," she said dubiously. "I wonder if it's just because he's sick?"

McClure adjusted the deck-chair pillow for her head with that quiet, unostentatious consideration she had come to expect and was sure she would miss very much.

"Oh, give him the benefit of the doubt," he said generously, and seemed to be paying more attention to a canoe race than to his companion. "Man or boy, no one is altogether responsible for what he does—out here."

Miss Severoid's mouth tightened.

"But—but it wasn't out here. It was—at home."

McClure's glance switched slowly to her troubled face and remained there.

"I see."

His hand went out and closed upon hers. She did not draw it away, and they sat in silence for a longer time than either knew, each waiting for the other to speak.

"What I said in Basanna, stands—before you tell me anything," McClure said at last very quietly and firmly. "And it will stand afterward, too. Are we going to have the ceremony first and the explanations afterward? It's all the same to me."

And Miss Severoid drew her hand away very slowly.

"He—he nearly killed a man and—and they put him in prison and—"

"That means you need help, doesn't it?" came the steady interruption. "Think I'm big enough?"

He rose and stood over her suddenly.

"Or is it that I don't make love with the finish of a matinée idol? I can't do that, little woman. Life's always been a pretty serious problem with me—though I may have pretended to laugh at most of it—and I can't gush."

He stooped and, before she could make any sort of protest that mattered, he had lifted her out of her chair and up into his arms. And that before all the river world!

"Let's go and see what Ralph has to say about it," and he moved with his faintly struggling burden toward the cabin.

"Bu—but gracious! You can't—"

McClure's mustache smothered the rest of it, and Ralph, seeing two small, white buckskin shoes dangling peacefully in mid-air just within his range of vision through the cabin doorway, wondered what on earth his amazing sister was trying to do.

But she had stopped trying.

She had succeeded.

All this happened while the Great White Queen was yet at Windsor, and Benin City is no longer the infernal city, though doubtless it is woolly enough still. But the government is there, accompanied by a few white trading stores and other signs of less bloodthirsty times than Daka's.

Several years after the city was cleared of Benis by large, cone-pointed *juju* monsters that came through the air from a far country and, dropping over the great mud wall, burst with a thunderous roar and scattered destruction all round about, a lieutenant of the "Waffs" named Dale was passing south from the city on his way to Saloko.

"Wonder if my headstone's still to the fore?" he

muttered to himself as he came to a little path that led to a *juju* worshiping hut.

So he strolled in to see.

A lizard with a golden head and a tail of blue-black ink, basking in the sun upon Ilora's grave, scurried away at Dale's approach. McClure's sprig of evergreen had vanished in a thunder-storm long, long ago.

The mango-stick cross had been battered by many rains and, having fallen over upon one side, a part of the cross-piece had become embedded in the soft, swampy ground. When Dale tried to raise the cross into an upright position, most of the right side of the cross-piece came away in his hand.

But the other half held.

And as he stuck the battered "headstone" into place, Dale smiled whimsically, and cut the letters that were left so that they stood out white and clear again—thus:

CLAVERING

Cralla's name had rotted away.

THE END

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